

Social identity and coethnic voting in the Middle East: Experimental evidence from Qatar

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ABSTRACT

What explains widespread coethnic voting in the Middle East? The prevailing understanding revolves around clientelism: the view that MENA citizens support coethnic parties and candidates in order to most easily or effectively extract resources from the patrimonial state. Previous research has thus neglected non-economic explanations of ethnic-based preferences and outcomes in MENA elections, including social biases long identified in other settings. This study presents findings from a conjoint survey experiment in Qatar, where symbolic elections lack distributional implications. Consistent with expectations derived from social identity theory, results reveal strong favoritism of cosectarian candidates, whereas objective candidate qualifications do not affect voter preferences. Bias is especially strong in a policy domain – promoting religious values – that prompts respondents to consider the candidate's ethnic identity. Findings offer clear evidence that ethnic-based voting in Qatar and likely elsewhere is not merely epiphenomenal but can reflect actual preferences for members of social in-groups.

1. Introduction

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), results of competitive elections consistently highlight the importance of tribal, confessional, and other ascriptive identities in shaping how voters in Arab countries select among candidates. Electoral outcomes are clearly impacted by group dynamics, with individuals and parties capturing the votes of coethnics in predictable ways. Studies of ethnic voting in MENA countries have identified a range of factors that can influence its character and likelihood, including social fragmentation (Gao, 2016), electoral rules (Kao, 2015), political party strength (Corstange, 2018), and level of authoritarianism (Lust-Okar, 2006, 2009). Yet, while emphasizing different variables that may privilege ethnic coordination, this diverse literature overwhelmingly agrees on the underlying behavioral explanation for in-group voting in the Arab world: clientelism. According to the prevailing view, citizens in the patronage-based regimes of the MENA region vote in order to extract resources from the patrimonial state, and under certain (common) conditions supporting coethnic candidates and parties represents the best or easiest way of doing so.

But are there also circumstances in which coethnic voting in Arab countries stems not from economic rent-seeking but actual social biases? Authoritarian MENA elections regularly see voters and parties use the occasions to voice political opposition, even at the expense of securing targeted goods (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009). Islamist

ideology is another widely studied non-material driver of Arab voting behavior (Kurzman and Naqvi, 2010). Meanwhile, strong out-group prejudice has been observed in MENA settings in which the out-group is demographically negligible and thus cannot represent a political-cum-economic competitor (e.g., Brooke, 2017). That Arab citizens sometimes engage in other electoral behaviors that belie a primarily economic motivation, and also sometimes show bias against out-groups that do not pose an economic threat, suggests that widespread coethnic voting may not owe to clientelism only, but also to positive or negative biases based on ascriptive identities.

Indeed, findings from other settings characterized by ethnic division, including decades of scholarship on race relations in the United States, provide stronger empirical evidence for the explanation of social bias, rather than economic self-interest, as the main link between voters' ethnic identities and support for coethnic candidates. This holds true of both electoral decisions specifically (e.g., McDermott, 1998; Campbell and Cowley, 2014) and choices between candidates in other domains such as immigration (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2010). Results have provided compelling support for social identity theory – the idea that individuals naturally categorize themselves and others into differentiated social groupings that generate in-group favoritism under minimal conditions (see Huddy, 2001 for a review) – as a framework for understanding coethnic voting. Thus it should be possible to observe in

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Middle East elections similar ascriptive-based preferences even in the absence of economic motivations.

This article extends previous work geographically, substantively, and methodologically by investigating coethnic voting preferences in the Arab Gulf state of Qatar using original public opinion data. We use a conjoint survey experiment to assess the impact of in-group confessional (sectarian) identity on Qataris' likelihood of voting for a candidate for the elected but purely advisory Central Municipal Council (CMC). We also explore the way that voters respond to "shades" of coethnicity (Mullen et al., 1992) by varying the type and certainty of information about the candidate's identity. To isolate the influence of confessional affiliation versus potentially correlated ascriptive attributes, we evaluate the effect of in-group identity on candidate ratings across several distinct policy domains, only one of which – upholding Islamic values – primes respondents to consider the candidate's religious denomination. We also probe the relationship between sectarian in-group bias and support for political Islam. The confessional homogeneity of Qatar's citizenry, combined with the structural inability of CMC members to target resources toward supporters, affords a compelling test of whether ethnic-based voting preferences can operate in a MENA society as a function of social identification and favoritism rather than expected material payoffs.

The analysis reveals strong, consistent bias in favor of in-group members, whereas objective candidate qualifications have no independent effects on respondents' evaluations or voting propensity. Consistent with social identity theory, respondents are more likely to vote for candidates whose names convey a stronger coethnic signal, but they do not demonstrate a qualitative negative prejudice against presumed non-coethnics. Comparing the effect of coethnic signal strength on candidate qualification ratings across different substantive policy areas reveals that in-group members receive especially favorable evaluations when primed to consider the candidate in the religious domain, demonstrating the link between coethnicity and in-group values that shape voter choice. Notably, however, results show that cosectarian voting is not linked to support for political Islam, highlighting the separation between voter preferences for more religious politicians and preferences for candidates from the voter's ethno-religious social group.

Our findings shed light on important questions surrounding coethnic voting in the Middle East, including in settings where elections are generally not consequential or descent-based cleavages are not extensive or highly salient. Substantively, they offer rare empirical evidence of in-group electoral preferences, showing that ethnic affinities in Qatar and likely elsewhere in the region are not merely epiphenomenal but can reflect actual social biases. The results also demonstrate that such preferences can manifest not simply in latent social attitudes but important political behaviors such as voting. In this, the largely ceremonial elections of the Gulf help to establish a lower bound on the relevance of identity politics to Arab voting. Finally, our study makes a significant methodological contribution, further establishing the utility of survey experiments in measuring sensitive preferences of MENA citizens that are likely to generate social desirability bias when solicited directly in an opinion survey.

2. Literature review and theory

2.1. Elections and ethnicity in the developing world

Elections in the Middle East and North Africa were once viewed primarily in light of larger processes of democratization and political liberalization, but recent scholarship has shown that they are important in their own right, irrespective of whether they are harbingers of impending transitions to democracy or instead serve to reinforce a non-democratic status quo (Lust-Okar, 2006, 2009; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Schedler, 2006). In most Arab states, electoral processes are tightly controlled by the regime and are intended to build legitimacy and enhance support for authoritarian rulers rather than afford

meaningful contests for power (Lust-Okar, 2009; Geddes and Zaller, 1989). Regime elites also use elections to gain information about the geographic distribution and depth of support among different constituent groups (Martinez-Bravo et al., 2011; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009). Likewise on the side of voters, elections in non-democratic MENA societies are generally viewed as competitions over access to state resources rather than instruments of policy change (Lust-Okar, 2006), with Arab citizens expected to vote primarily in order to obtain clientelistic benefits promised by candidates and parties (Lust-Okar, 2006; Lust, 2009).

Ethnicity refers to the common sense of belonging created by shared culture, descent, race, religion, or sect (Varshney, 2007; Horowitz, 1985), and is widely theorized to be a key basis for organizing competition over state resources (Varshney, 2007; Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Chandra, 2004, 2006). Ethnic identities are generally thought to organize political competition in both democracies and non-democracies, although there is less consensus as to why individuals tend to prefer in-group members (e.g., Geertz, 1963; Petersen, 2002; Varshney, 2007). Fearon (1999) argues that targeted goods transfers and ethnic politics tend to coincide because ascriptive identities are stable over time. Moreover, in low-information political environments such as those of MENA and other developing societies, outward markers of ascriptive identity help citizens make inferences about others' preferences, privileging coordination along ethnic categories (Corstange, 2008; Chandra, 2004). Scholars of ethnic voting in the Arab world therefore commonly assume that political competition is driven by the desire to access scarce state resources, and that ethnic parties and clientelistic networks mediate access to these goods for their coethnic constituents.

A number of cases including, Iraq (Penn, 2008), Bahrain (Gengler, 2015), Jordan (Gao, 2016; Lust, 2009), Kuwait (Al-Kandari and Al-Hadben, 2010), Lebanon (Corstange, 2016; Cammett and Issar, 2010), Turkey (Akdag, 2014) and Yemen (Corstange, 2016) have been studied as cases in which ascriptive identities serve as the basis for political parties and networks that link citizens to the state through goods provision. Electoral outcomes throughout the MENA region are also commonly explained with reference to clientelistic ethnic-based voting (e.g., Corstange, 2010; Elling, 2015; Brown, 2008). However, this work has focused almost exclusively on the role of institutions and other structural factors in privileging coethnic voting, rather than investigating the attitudes and preferences of individual voters. Meanwhile, the few extant individual-level studies of ethnic voting in Arab countries have focused on clientelism as the key behavioral mechanism (e.g., Corstange, 2018).

A rich literature on ethnic voting in sub-Saharan Africa has largely paralleled the MENA scholarly progression: initial focus on primordial group conflict, later attention to the instrumental functions of ethnic identity, and a more recent turn toward understanding the social dimensions of ethnic preferences as informed by experimental methods. As in the Arab world, early scholarship attributed ethnic affinities in Africa to deeply rooted or essential differences between groups (Geertz, 1963; Horowitz, 1985), with elections conceived as "ethnic censuses" (Horowitz, 1993). But such explanations could not account for variation in the existence and character of ethnic competition, leading to more instrumentalist explanations. Scholars reasoned that African voting behavior aligns with ethnic boundaries because citizens are concerned with extracting goods and services from the state via clientelism, and certain political and geographic variables favor the coordination of such efforts by ethnicity (Conroy-Krutz, 2013). These conditions include the presence of local intermediaries (Koter, 2013; De Kadt and Larreguy, 2018), proportional representation electoral laws (Huber, 2012), and the ability of political candidates to make credible commitments to voters (Keefe, 2010). Conversely, Dunning and Harrison (2010)'s study of cousinage in Mali explains how cross-cutting social identities can reduce reliance on ethnicity as a basis for political coordination.

Together, such findings beg the question: Beyond a politician's likelihood of delivering clientelistic benefits, do MENA and other citizens prefer candidates who possess particular ascriptive attributes? Similarly, research has sought to understand how and why ethnic-based coalitions emerge and succeed in the Middle East and other developing contexts, yet the extent to which they might result from social bias among voters remains understudied.

2.2. Non-economic motivators of Arab voting behavior

Although scholars often assume that individual-level electoral preferences in the Arab and developing world are driven by clientelistic calculations, in fact studies of voting behavior in MENA states have identified diverse non-economic motivations. These include ideological opposition to the regime (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Greene, 2007; Gengler, 2015), feelings of efficacy and support for democracy (Chen and Zhong, 2002), evaluations of past government performance (De Miguel et al., 2015), and support for a promising opposition party (Van de Walle, 2006). So too, legislative behavior in some autocracies bears a strong correspondence to citizens' programmatic preferences, indicating that authoritarian bureaucrats are concerned about more than targeted economic distribution to supporters (Shalaby and Aydogan, 2018; Malesky and Schuler, 2010).

Religion, and Islamist ideology in particular, is another important observed non-material motivator of Arab electoral behavior (Kurzman and Türkoğlu, 2015; Kurzman and Naqvi, 2010). Previous work has focused on understanding preferences for religious versus secular politicians in contexts in which this distinction is salient (e.g., Benstead et al., 2015). Voters who support Islamist parties and candidates are assumed to do so, at least in part, based on their promise to promote Islamic values in society and politics, as distinguished from secular or leftist values (Pellicer and Wegner, 2014; Benstead et al., 2015; Blaydes and Linzer, 2012; Schwedler and Schwedler, 2006; but see Masoud, 2014). Using cross-national opinion data from the MENA region, Wegner and Cavatorta (2018) identify a common set of ideological voter preferences revolving around political Islam and gender roles.

In sum, there is ample evidence that voting behavior in the Middle East may be driven by factors other than economic incentives, including religious orientations, principled support for or opposition to parties and regimes, government performance, and still other motivators. But, to date, these findings have not informed explanations of ethnic voting in the MENA setting, whose behavioral roots continue to be conceived of and investigated overwhelmingly through the lens of clientelism. We contend that social identity theory offers a compelling alternative basis for understanding and studying widespread ethnic-based voting in the Arab world. Social identity theory explains why strong preferences for in-group candidates can exist in a case such as Qatar, where symbolic elections carry no distributive implications and where an atypically homogeneous population makes descent-based distinctions indeed only marginally relevant to social and political life. By extension, the framework also suggests that social biases operate alongside of, or interact with, material motivations in driving coethnic voting behaviors in other Arab settings where the two mechanisms are harder to disentangle.

2.3. Social identity and political bias

The overarching characterization of Arab coethnic voting as being driven by patronage networks excludes a basic possibility explored at length in other settings: social-psychological affinity for coethnics. That is, voters may hold preferences for members of their ascriptive in-group that operate regardless of what is at stake economically. Social identity theory has been employed for decades in psychology and later political psychology as a framework for explaining the formation of groups and the conflict that arises between them (Tajfel et al., 1979; Tajfel, 1969). As Huddy (2001) summarizes, among the most notable insights of this voluminous literature is that in-group favoritism occurs under

very minimal conditions of differentiation that are easily introduced in laboratory settings (Brewer, 1979; Kinket and Verkuyten, 1997), meaning that favoritism does not require a high level of group salience. Furthermore, because individuals form groups in order to differentiate themselves positively from others, bias in favor of in-group members is observed more readily than out-group prejudice (Brewer, 1979). Other research has studied "shades of identity", in which the propensity to identify with a group depends on one's proximity to a theoretical group prototype that embodies its essence (Huddy, 2001; Mullen et al., 1992).

Moving beyond artificial identities created in a lab, political scientists have built upon social identity theory to study long-standing racial prejudices in the U.S. context, developing concepts such as symbolic racism (Henry and Sears, 2002; Tarman and Sears, 2005), racial resentment (Kinder et al., 1996) and subtle racism (Pettigrew and Meertens, 1995). These paradigms share the assumption that antipathy underlying political behavior derives from a coherent set of abstract beliefs about out-group members and their attributes (Henry and Sears, 2002). They understand prejudice among whites as stemming from negative feelings toward blacks and the view that they "violate cherished American values" (Henry and Sears, 2002, p. 254). This rejection of out-group members based on perceived value differences has long been found to have more predictive power in the American setting than economic-related or instrumentalist explanations of political preferences (cf. Sears, 1987).

Almost no quantitative studies have sought to detect ascriptive group biases and assess their effects on voting and other political behaviors in the Middle East. Yet emerging literature on sectarianism suggests the importance of Arab social identities outside of competition over economic resources. Recent studies have observed strong sectarian prejudice in MENA settings where the out-group is demographically negligible and thus cannot represent a political-cum-economic competitor. Brooke (2017) explains bias against (almost non-existent) Shi'a Muslims in Egypt as a consequence of social pressure to adopt bigoted attitudes in order to avoid in-group ostracism. Similarly, Wage-makers (2016) shows that Jordanian Salafis employ public anti-Shi'a rhetoric to signal political support for the state. At the level of religious elites, Saleh and Kraetzschmar (2015) argue that Egyptian Sunni clerics use anti-Shi'a rhetoric to gain popularity by appealing to mass prejudices. Still other research has documented social ostracism of Shi'a immigrants by Sunni immigrants in Europe, where both groups represent an ethno-religious minority (Olsson, 2017).

Growing survey evidence from Africa also supports the conclusion that social biases need not depend on group contestation. Studying opinion data from 14 countries, Adida et al. (2016) find that individuals exaggerate positive attitudes toward non-coethnics and politicians who symbolize non-coethnic groups when questioned by an out-group member. Although this effect is multiplied in cases where the groups have historically been in conflict, the authors observe bias even when social distinctions are "non-politically relevant". In Uganda, Carlson (2016) observes implicit bias against non-coethnic electoral candidates that are activated by the mere presence of an out-group member in the form of the survey enumerator. As in the MENA context, such results increasingly call into question the presumed material foundations of ethnic preferences. In what follows, we extend the application of social identity theory geographically, substantively, and methodologically by examining the case of cosectarian voting in Qatar via a conjoint experiment.

2.4. Detecting coethnic preferences through surveys

The literature on racial and sectarian prejudice demonstrates the difficulties of measuring out-group bias through social surveys. Increasingly, the need to detect and correct for measurement error resulting from social desirability bias in surveys has led researchers to move beyond straightforward questions and adopt experimental approaches. The study of race relations in American political behavior has been

influenced by the development of field and survey experiments related to voter preferences. This effort began with [Sigelman and Sigelman \(1982\)](#), who asked college students to select among political candidates of different races, genders, and ages and found support for the idea that respondents prefer candidates who are similar to themselves. Subsequent studies based on quasi-experimental data have suggested that respondents use race and gender as information short-cuts for selecting between candidates in low-information electoral settings ([McDermott, 1998](#)). Since then, numerous experiments have validated the relationship between ascriptive identity and voter preferences in the U.S. setting (see [Cutler, 2002](#); [Campbell and Cowley, 2014](#)).

The study of ethnic voting in Africa has strongly been informed by, and helped to advance, this use of experimental methods. Influential work by [Carlson \(2014\)](#) shows that responses to direct survey items about voter preferences for coethnics included in the widely-used regional Afrobarometer survey are prone to underreporting owing to social desirability bias, as respondents perceive that objective qualifications are more socially acceptable reasons to prefer a candidate. In response, a number of experiments have been conducted to better estimate the impact of coethnicity on voting behavior in Africa ([Conroy-Krutz, 2013](#); [Carlson, 2015](#); [Adida, 2015](#)). In one, [Carlson \(2016\)](#) finds that respondents are less likely to reveal ascriptive-based voting preferences when their survey choices can be observed by others and when respondents have been primed to think about the ethnic connotations of their vote.

It is reasonable to expect that individuals in the Arab world are similarly influenced not only by group identities, but also by social desirability bias when voting preferences are solicited directly in a survey. Arab voters may recognize the importance of descent-based criteria in their choice among political candidates but be reluctant to offer such a socially unacceptable response. Individuals face incentives to avoid revealing an affinity or antipathy toward specific groups in society ([Schuman and Converse, 1971](#); [Anderson et al., 1988](#); [Davis, 1997](#)) or a disregard for the meritocratic principles behind democratic elections.¹ To be sure, a growing literature on interviewer effects in the Arab world has documented how survey respondents edit their answers in order to conform to the presumed views of their enumerator as inferred from numerous social identities, including gender ([Benstead, 2013](#)), religious denomination ([Gengler, 2015](#)), degree of religiosity ([Blaydes and Gillum, 2013](#); [Benstead, 2014](#)), and nationality ([Gengler et al., 2019](#)). Other aspects of MENA surveys, such as the survey sponsor ([Corstange, 2014](#)) and the presence of third parties during the interview ([Mneimneh et al., 2015](#)), have also been shown to affect survey participation and response and thus lead to incorrect conclusions about attitudes and behaviors.

Studies of individual voter preferences have not figured prominently in the extensive literature on ethnic voting in Arab societies, and those studies that exist generally have not utilized experiments. However, like researchers working elsewhere, MENA scholars increasingly recognize the social desirability implications of asking respondents to report sensitive group preferences directly. [Brooke \(2017\)](#) uses a list experiment to demonstrate the presence of out-group bias against Egypt's tiny Shi'a community. The survey experiment reveals that the strength of this sentiment is shaped by social desirability and decreases when a respondent is isolated from social pressures. Elsewhere, [Benstead et al. \(2015\)](#) assess how candidate gender and religiosity affect electability in Tunisia by presenting respondents with randomized photos of hypothetical candidates. [Kao and Benstead \(2020\)](#) use a non-conjoint

¹ Indeed, in the Afrobarometer, Arab Barometer ([Tessler et al., 2016](#)), and many other surveys, questions about voting behavior are commonly situated within larger sections of questions related to electoral participation, political trust and values, and attitudes toward democracy, potentially or even likely implying to respondents a linkage between their voting preferences and their wider democratic orientations.

survey experiment to examine the interactive effects of multiple candidate identities – gender, ethnicity, and Islamist – on vote choice in Jordan, finding that female candidates, though less electable overall, are not discriminated against by coethnic, co-Islamist, or other women voters. Finally a Qatari scholar, [Al-Ansari \(2017\)](#), asks respondents to rate resumes of hypothetical job candidates that include randomized objective and ascriptive attributes, finding that Qataris prefer profiles whose names indicate fellow Arab and Muslim applicants.

3. Identity politics in the Arab gulf

To date, theories and study of voting behavior in MENA societies have been little informed by insights from the Arab Gulf. This reflects the fact that only two of the six Arab Gulf states² – Bahrain and Kuwait – hold (or have held) meaningful elections ([Zaccara, 2013](#)), and also a perennial lack of reliable survey data from the region (cf. [Corstange, 2018](#); [Benstead, 2018](#)). These considerations may combine to give the impression that the Arab Gulf monarchies are not very appropriate venues for the study of elections and voting, that observations from the region are unlikely to be instructive for other MENA cases, or, at least, that practical obstacles surrounding data availability and collection limit the insights to be gained.

Yet qualitative analyses of Gulf elections have long emphasized the place of coethnic voting, especially on the basis of tribal and confessional identities, in driving electoral outcomes. In-group favoritism is regularly observed both in countries that hold consequential legislative elections, like Bahrain ([Louër, 2008](#)) and Kuwait ([Al-Kandari and Al-Hadben, 2010](#)), as well as in those Gulf states where elected councils are purely symbolic, such as Saudi Arabia ([Kraetzschmar, 2010](#)) and Qatar ([Al-Shawi, 2002](#)). Indeed, the dominant role of ascriptive-based voting has prompted frequent changes to electoral rules and boundaries by Gulf authorities, including a controversial ban on informal tribal 'primaries' in Kuwait ([Osman, 2011](#)).

While scholarship on coethnic voting in the Arab Gulf has not been grounded in social identity theory, the framework provides a useful lens through which to understand the nature of ascriptive preferences and form testable theoretical expectations about their effects on voting in the Gulf states and beyond. First, social identity theory holds that group identities like tribal and sectarian affiliation can possess salience and shape individual behavior even where material motivators for conflict are absent ([Kinket and Verkuyten, 1997](#)). The largely ceremonial elections of the Gulf therefore serve to establish a lower bound on the relevance of identity politics to Arab voting, showing that it is not merely epiphenomenal or contingent upon economic competition. One can identify examples such as Bahrain or Iraq where group identity is highly politicized and provides an overt basis for political coalitions and voting ([Gengler, 2015](#)); but one would not expect to find a setting where it is wholly irrelevant.

Social identity theory also explains that positive group differentiation requires fewer conditions than negative out-group bias ([Brewer, 1979](#)). Accordingly, one might expect that coethnic voting in materially-inconsequential Gulf elections, particularly in countries such as Qatar where ascriptive differences are not demographically or socially significant, stems mainly from citizens' support for in-group members rather than rejection of out-group candidates. On the other hand, findings on symbolic racism in the United States and Islamic sectarianism in contexts such as Egypt lead to a clear expectation of negative prejudice against candidates from out-groups, irrespective of their demographic weight. To help adjudicate between these competing prospects, we attempt to move beyond the binary categories of coethnic/non-coethnic to examine how Arab voter preferences are

² These are the oil- and gas-exporting monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula that together form the Gulf Cooperation Council: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

affected by ambiguity surrounding a candidate's ethnicity (see Huddy, 2001 on "shades of identity"). We expect that the probability of voting for a candidate will increase with the level of certainty that she is a coethnic, as inferred from available information—in our case, the candidate's name.

Third, social identity theory predicts that individuals are more likely to form a positive preference when a candidate approximates the group prototype or endorses the key values of an idealized group member (Mullen et al., 1992). We treat confessional religious (sectarian) identity within the broader literature on ethnicity because it is overwhelmingly assigned at birth and thus constitutes a non-permeable ascriptive attribute. However, sect is also intertwined with certain religious values and practices that can be ascribed to the prototypical group member. This leads us to several related propositions. First, electoral candidates perceived to exhibit in-group religious values should be preferred over those who do not. Second, individuals may evaluate candidates who express religious values differently depending on whether the candidate is a cosectarian. Finally, individuals will be particularly favorable to coethnic candidates when evaluating their qualifications in the religious domain relative to their suitability in other substantive policy areas, because a direct reference to religion will prime respondents to consider the candidate's ethno-sectarian identity.

A final set of expectations further explores this relation between sect as an ethnic category and sect as a religious category. As described, social identity theory posits a connection between in-group sectarian identity and expected religious values that serve as a marker of that identity. But a preference for candidates who espouse religious values may also stem from a different cause unrelated to ethnicity: normative or programmatic support for political Islam. This raises the question of whether Arab cosectarian voting is driven mainly by social bias toward in-group members or instead by an Islamic orientation that prefers politicians to promote religious values in the public sphere. In other words, is the relevant political distinction between candidates who exhibit the 'correct' versus 'incorrect' religious values (but in each case promote religion), or between Islamist versus secular candidates (e.g., Benstead et al., 2015)? We expect to find stronger evidence in favor of the former mechanism in the highly religious societies of the Arab Gulf, which lack a tradition of political secularism but feature greater diversity and contestation over proper religious norms and practice.

4. The case of Qatar

Qatar is a small, wealthy Gulf Arab emirate of some 2.5 million residents, of whom around 350,000 are Qatari nationals. For two key reasons, Qatar affords a particularly good venue in which to explore the non-material bases of coethnic voting in the Middle East: first, ethnic distinctions among Qatari citizens are minute compared to cleavages in most other MENA states and lack the political salience seen elsewhere; and, second, members of Qatar's elected deliberative body, the Central Municipal Council (CMC), lack the institutional authority to reward their voters. This combination of low salience of ethnicity and virtually nonexistent material payoff of voting makes for a hard test of observing ascriptive-based preferences.

4.1. Ethnicity in Qatar

Qatar's citizenry is unusually homogeneous along the primary descent-based categories of race (Arab), religion (Islam), and confessional school/denomination (Hanbali Sunni), mainly as a result of highly restrictive citizenship laws (Babar, 2014). This makes non-coethnics a largely symbolic out-group for Qataris. Specifically, Shi'a Muslims, including some of Persian descent, are estimated to comprise only between 5 and 10 percent of citizens (Stephens, 2012), and there is also a minor population of citizens of African descent. Confessional diversity in Qatar is accordingly much less pronounced

and less politicized than in neighboring MENA states, including other Arab Gulf states. Qatari Shi'a are virtually invisible as such, speaking, dressing, and living in ways largely identical to their Sunni conationals (Stephens, 2012). They are on the whole neither richer nor poorer than other citizens, although several leading merchant families are Shi'a (Kamrava, 2015). In short, Shi'a citizens are identifiable in name only, and any local salience of sectarian religious identity owes to the Gulf region's wider geopolitical competition between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'i Iran (see Gause, 2014).

Ethnic distinctions in Qatar are also deemphasized as a function of the renter political economy and the state's associated interest in cultivating a national identity over against subnational loyalties. Qatar's resource-based economy militates against group-based contestation, encouraging instead individualized competition over state benefits (Luciani, 1990). Around 90 percent of working citizens are linked directly to the state through public sector employment (Behar, 2015), and all Qataris are entitled to a range of generous benefits as part of what is likely the world's most extensive welfare system (Mitchell, 2013). The state is thus the monopolist patron of citizens, who need not rely on private clientelistic networks, ethnic-based or otherwise, to tap into the country's wealth. As of 2014, Qatari household income averaged \$25,000 USD per month (Qatar Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics, 2014). This liberal and indiscriminate deployment of patronage is indeed the foundation of Qatar's nation-building strategy, which is to erode the political salience of subnational groupings (and competing allegiances) by cutting them out of the chain of distribution.

4.2. Elections in Qatar

Qatar is a dynastic monarchy ruled by the Al Thani family, whose popular legitimacy and support is maintained through extensive economic patronage (Hertog et al., 2013; Ulrichsen, 2015). The interests of leading tribes and merchant families are also represented formally through an appointed Shura Council, which must approve the government's budget and proposed legislation. While Qatar's constitution has provided for the direct election of this body since 1971, the state has continued to postpone elections. Likely as partial compensation, in 1998 an Emiri decree established an elected Central Municipal Council (CMC), whose 29 members have been chosen every four years since 1999. However, political parties remain barred, and, unlike the appointed Shura Council, the CMC possesses no legislative or executive powers or indeed a budget: its function is limited to discussion and suggestions to the Ministry of Municipality and Environment, of which it is formally a part.³

The CMC nonetheless serves some domestic and foreign policy goals of the Qatari state. Internationally, it helps soften the country's image as an autocratic oil monarchy and signals elite interest in measured steps toward more inclusive and accountable governance. In addition to sending the same messages locally, CMC elections also provide information about social and geographic patterns of political behavior. Both Sunni and Shi'i citizens have served on the council, but candidates are officially prohibited from campaigning on the basis of tribe or sect (Al-Raya, 2015). Still, most take pains to clarify lineage in their campaign materials, enumerating full family names to the extent of four or even five generations. Promotional literature and campaign signs also frequently include Qur'anic invocations and allusions that emphasize candidate religiosity. Where appropriate, campaign materials reference educational attainment via prefixes such as "Dr". or "Engineer". That being said, not all CMC members and candidates are highly educated, and literacy is the only formal educational requirement stipulated by

³ A CMC report of the topics discussed during the 2011–2015 term offers an instructive view of its activities. It lists only three items (or "studies"): the planting of trees alongside roads, the use of vacant lands for sports fields, and the naming of streets and districts (Qatar Central Municipal Council, 2015).

electoral rules (Qatar Ministry of Interior, 2015). Judging from name prefixes, only five of the 29 of the members elected in 2015 held a graduate or professional degree, including the two women councilors.

Whatever its use for the government, the CMC offers no promise of material benefits for Qatari voters. The council lacks the authority to allocate resources and meets just once every two weeks while in session. As a result, public interest in elections has been far outweighed by official coverage celebrating Qatar's only publicly-elected institution. Rates of voter registration and participation have declined each year since 1999 (Zaccara, 2011). Still, the act of voting is a cheap signal of one's allegiance to the state – registration can even be done online – that might eventually earn some marginal reward or help avoid future punishment.⁴ It may also constitute a simple act of support for a friend or family member who happens to be a candidate. In short, CMC elections offer a degree of political participation and symbolic representation for a Qatari citizenry still awaiting national-level elections.

5. Data and methods

5.1. Survey data

Data for our study come from an original telephone survey fielded just weeks prior to the May 2015 election of the Qatar Central Municipal Council. The survey included a total of 848 Qatari respondents. Respondents were selected among cellular phone subscribers via list-assisted random digit dialing, with the initial responder selected as participant. The list frame originated from the largest mobile telecommunications provider in Qatar, with approximately 95 percent coverage of adult citizens. The response rate, following the standard American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) definition RR3, was 34.1 percent (sampling error of 4.0 percent). The quarterly phone survey of Qatari nationals conducted by the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) was fielded amid the campaign season when potential voters were evaluating real CMC candidates, making the experimental task highly relevant. That said, the CMC candidate list was not published until after the fielding of the survey, making it impossible for respondents to have known who was actually running in the election and adding to the realistic nature of the experimental task of evaluating a hypothetical candidate.

5.2. Experimental design

The survey experiment was designed to simulate the complex nature of candidate selection by presenting respondents with a profile consisting of randomized attributes and then asking them to rate the candidate in a variety of ways. The instrument was based on the well-known conjoint approach of Hainmueller et al. (2014). This design helps researchers overcome issues of sensitivity related to certain candidate characteristics, because the respondent evaluates a set of candidate characteristics rather than being asked to divulge opinions directly (cf. Hainmueller et al., 2014; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2015, 3). Whereas candidates' ascriptive attributes could be a sensitive topic for traditional survey questions, the conjoint design allows respondents to report preferences indirectly.

A hypothetical CMC candidate was created by randomly selecting six different pieces of information: first (given) name, last (family)

name, gender, work experience, education, and religious values.⁵ Information about the candidate's education, work experience, and religiosity (distinct from confessional affiliation) were provided to the respondent in a brief description. Education and work experience are objective qualifications that previous studies suggest, based on non-experimental survey results, are important to Gulf Arab voters (e.g., Subhi et al., 2016; Yaghi and Antwi-Boateng, 2015). The candidate's education level was either a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, or unmentioned. His or her work experience was either private sector only or else not mentioned. Finally, the candidate was described as seeking to "promote Qatari religious and cultural values", or else religiosity was not mentioned. As indicated, the design included pure controls so that some respondents received no information about these characteristics. Finally, ascriptive attributes were conveyed through the candidate's first and last name (cf. Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004; Butler and Brockman, 2011), including gender and the main treatment of interest: confessional religious affiliation (i.e., Sunni or Shi'i Muslim).

In the context of Qatar, family name is the most accurate identifier of confessional identity, since denomination is overwhelmingly decided by descent rather than conversion. However, it was not possible to collect sensitive information about family and sectarian belonging in a survey. In the absence of other suitable proxies, such as neighborhood, selecting ethnic treatments required a simplifying assumption about respondent identities: given overall confessional demographics in Qatar, we assumed that the vast majority of survey respondents were Sunni Muslims and would identify more closely with Sunni candidate names.⁶ Thus, the related treatments are hereafter referred to as coethnic (Sunni candidate) and non-coethnic (Shi'i candidate). While we follow previous work in treating sect primarily as an ethnic category (e.g., Corstange, 2016; Gengler, 2015), in the analysis to follow we do also explore the connection between coethnic identity expressions of in-group religious norms.

The first and last names used as experimental treatments were carefully selected to convey information about ethnic identity to the respondent that could be used as a heuristic for evaluating potential local representatives (cf. Chandra, 2007). Profiles included either a first name and the patronymic Abdullah only, thus giving no family name and making ethnicity ambiguous; or else a first name and one of two family names: Al-Ghanim or Al-Majed. In Qatar, the family name Al-Ghanim conveys a clear Sunni pedigree, whereas Al-Majed is a family name associated with the Shi'a community.⁷ The relatively small number of families readily identifiable as Qatari served to limit the possible names for the experiment. We deliberately avoided names that would be too obvious a sectarian cue (e.g., al-Ja'afari or al-'Ajmi) and selected a milder treatment that would also clearly denote a Shi'i candidate.⁸ Finally, the first names Hussain and Zainab were used to represent stereotypically 'Shi'i' given names that, either alone or in

⁵ The number of randomized traits was limited in an effort to reduce the cognitive burden on respondents, who hear the information orally rather than reading it themselves as is more common in conjoint experiments (Carlson, 2015; Haab and McConnell, 2002). The candidate's ethnic and gender identities were quickly conveyed through the first and last names and the remaining treatments were fairly short and similar in length to standard vignette-style questions often employed in phone surveys (e.g., Hopkins and King, 2010).

⁶ It is possible or even likely that a small number of our respondents are Shi'a rather than Sunni Qataris. However, this would have the effect of muting any positive Sunni coethnic effect. In fact, then, the simplifying assumption about our sample leads us to a more conservative estimate of in-group bias.

⁷ To avoid confusion over the hypothetical nature of the question, we selected families that were not represented on the then-current CMC.

⁸ This consideration also led us to the methodological choice of having respondents rate only one candidate, rather than several profiles in sequence as is more common in conjoint experiments, to reduce the possibility that respondents would recognize the ethnic dimensions of the name treatments and modify their answers.

⁴ To head off an opposition boycott of parliamentary elections in 2014, for example, authorities in neighboring Bahrain threatened that citizens who did not vote might become ineligible for public sector jobs (Gengler, 2014).

combination with Al-Majed, would suggest a Shi'i candidate. Khalid and Noor were used as generic first names that, if not quintessentially 'Sunni' in the same way, suggest nothing to the contrary. Thus, candidates' family names conveyed either ambiguous or indicative ethnic information, while first names provided additional but less reliable ascriptive information to respondents.

Following the hypothetical profile, respondents were asked to evaluate the candidate in several ways. First, respondents were asked, "Overall, how likely would you be to vote for this candidate during the upcoming 2015 Central Municipal Council elections?" Responses were recorded on a four-point scale from "very likely" to "very unlikely". Although it has no power to design or execute policy or to allocate funds, the CMC does have latitude to make recommendations on a range of local issues. Accordingly, respondents were asked to evaluate the candidate's qualifications in various policy domains, including in dealing with economic, educational, and environmental issues, respectively. A final domain was "promoting Islamic values", which was chosen to prime respondents to think about a candidate's confessional identity (cf. Carlson, 2016). The four-point response scale for each issue area ranged from "very qualified" to "not at all qualified". Variables were left in their native metric, and the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) reported in the following section reflect the impact of the treatment variables relative to the baseline.⁹ Since all candidate characteristics were randomly selected, AMCEs provide an estimate of which candidate characteristics, ascriptive or otherwise, have a greater impact on vote choice relative to the other factors.

None of the possible candidate profiles were excluded from analysis, as all were logically valid (see Hainmueller et al., 2014). Each respondent assessed only one hypothetical candidate profile, rather than several profiles in sequence as is more common, to avoid revealing the potentially sensitive ethno-sectarian dimensions of the treatment. While this served to decrease the statistical power of the analysis, it was necessary to avoid potential learning effects and resulting measurement error.¹⁰ The *c-joint* package in R was used to incorporate the experimental design elements directly into analysis and assess the AMCEs of each profile attribute (Strezhnev et al., 2013).

5.3. Non-experimental data

In addition to the experiment, respondents were also asked a number of direct questions about the CMC as an institution and about the factors they take into consideration when selecting among CMC candidates. The latter questions asked respondents, "When voting for candidates in the Municipal Council elections, how important is each of the following factors to you?" The factors included were the candidate's family or tribe, level of religiosity, level of education, and level of "agreement with you on important issues". These items appeared after the experimental treatment, and the order of candidate attributes was randomized to avoid ordering effects. They were designed to mirror non-experimental questions traditionally asked on social scientific surveys to determine how voters make choices. They also correspond substantively to the main candidate attributes explored in the experiment, so that the direct responses can be compared with the experimental results in order to test for the influence of social desirability bias. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the sample,

⁹ Here we follow most conjoint implementations in presenting AMCE estimates. However, our substantive findings are robust to a number of different specifications and modeling strategies, including the estimation of marginal means as recently suggested by Leeper et al. (2020).

¹⁰ One of the key assumptions of conjoint designs is that there are no carryover effects between tasks. A one-task conjoint such as ours may be atypical, but this design does not bias the estimates; rather it ensures that a key assumption is true by definition. Of course, standard errors are increased as a result of lower statistical power, making it harder to detect statistically significant treatment effects.

Table 1
Summary of survey responses.

Variable	Level	Percent (or mean)
Income	Less than 30 K	24%
	30 K–50 K	24%
	50 K–70 K	18%
	70 K or more	34%
Gender	Male	49%
	Female	51%
Education	Less than secondary	20%
	Secondary	39%
	Post-secondary diploma	8%
	Any university degree	33%
Age	Mean age	37 yrs
Vote factor: family/tribe	Very important	23%
Vote factor: education	Very important	87%
Vote factor: religiosity	Very important	62%
Vote factor: issue agreement	Very important	67%

including responses to these direct questions about the importance of different candidate characteristics. As will be considered further in the Findings section, only 23% of Qataris reported that a candidate's ethnic background is "very important" to determining their vote choice, whereas the three non-ascriptive factors garnered much higher percentages.

5.4. Analysis and expectations

In the Findings section to follow, the analysis proceeds in several steps. We first report the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for our experiment. If a politician's ethnic identity is important to Qatari voters as predicted by social identity theory, we expect respondents to be significantly more willing to vote for candidates with a family name that signifies a coethnic. Respondents may also prefer candidates who possess a coethnic first name, but this effect is likely to be attenuated by the less reliable ascriptive information it provides. Conversely, if non-identity-related criteria such as candidate education and political experience are more important to voters, then these treatments should be positive and significant. We also expect a positive effect of the religious values treatment, because such values are one trait of the prototypical in-group member. Yet individuals may evaluate candidates who express religious values differently depending on whether the candidate is perceived to be a coethnic. If this is the case, we expect to see a positive effect for the religious values treatment only in subsamples of candidates who can be reliably deemed coethnics on the basis of their name.

Beyond AMCEs for individual treatments, we also interact the given and family name treatments to form an overall measure of coethnic signal strength. We then use this scale to predict vote choice, using ordered logistic regression. Social identity theory implies that the combined first and last name treatments should have positive effects on voting probability for name interactions that allow respondents to ascertain the candidate's coethnic identity with a high degree of certainty; but theory and previous empirical findings give conflicting predictions about whether effects should be negative for presumed non-coethnic candidates. Next, we compare the effect of coethnicity across the four substantive domains of candidate qualification: economics, education, the environment, and religion. We expect that the matter of religion triggers respondents to consider a candidate's ethno-sectarian identity more than the other policy areas, generating a stronger positive effect of coethnicity. In a penultimate section, we examine the extent to which observed coethnic favoritism is driven by Islamist voters, which our theory does not predict. Finally, we compare our experimental findings to results from traditional survey questions, to assess the influence of social desirability bias on the study of coethnic voting in MENA societies. We expect that respondents will rate ascriptive affiliations as being less important to them than objective candidate qualifications when asked directly, in contrast with the experimental results.

6. Findings

6.1. Candidate identity and voter preferences

The experiment asked Qataris to rate their likelihood of voting for the hypothetical municipal council candidate. Fig. 1 presents the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for each of the candidate characteristics relative to a preselected baseline.¹¹ As Fig. 1 shows, the last name of the candidate significantly altered voting propensities: respondents were much more likely to vote for profiles with the coethnic family name, compared to candidates with the non-coethnic family name or those without a family name (having only an ethnically ambiguous patronymic). The fact that profiles lacking a family name (labeled as ‘ambiguous’) are judged similarly to those with a non-coethnic family name suggests that voters rely on last name as an information shortcut when making voting decisions and hesitate when profiles lack that information.¹² Respondents were also more willing to vote for candidates whose profiles included a positive indicator of the in-group Islamic values. Notably, however, the objective qualification attributes of education and work experience did not affect vote choice. This insignificant result is diametrically opposed to the answers to the non-experimental questions reported in Table 1, as discussed more below. Together, the findings are consistent with expectations that voters will demonstrate ascriptive bias based on the candidate’s last name and are more willing to support candidates who express appropriate in-group values. However, these overall estimates do not provide insight into how voters react to differing, including potentially conflicting, pieces of ascriptive information about candidates.

Further analysis investigated how respondents are influenced by different combinations of first and last name treatments, in order to better understand how candidate names lead to ascriptive inferences and thus to voting decisions. To begin, the sample was split between coethnic and non-coethnic first names, and then treatment effects were estimated by first name subgroup. Table 2 presents these results. In cases where the candidate was randomly assigned a coethnic first name, profiles with the coethnic family name were positively rated, but the treatment effect was comparatively weak and not statistically significant. Meanwhile, among candidates assigned the non-coethnic first name, profiles with the coethnic family name were highly favored (AMCE = 0.311, $p = 0.022$). Thus, if a candidate’s given name already suggests a coethnic, a family name that provides confirmation of coethnicity has only a mild additional positive effect. But if the candidate’s first name suggests the possibility of him being a non-coethnic, respondents are much more likely to vote for the candidate if the coethnic family name contradicts (i.e., ameliorates) this impression of non-coethnicity.¹³

Moreover, as predicted by social identity theory, respondents reacted differently to the religious values treatment depending on the

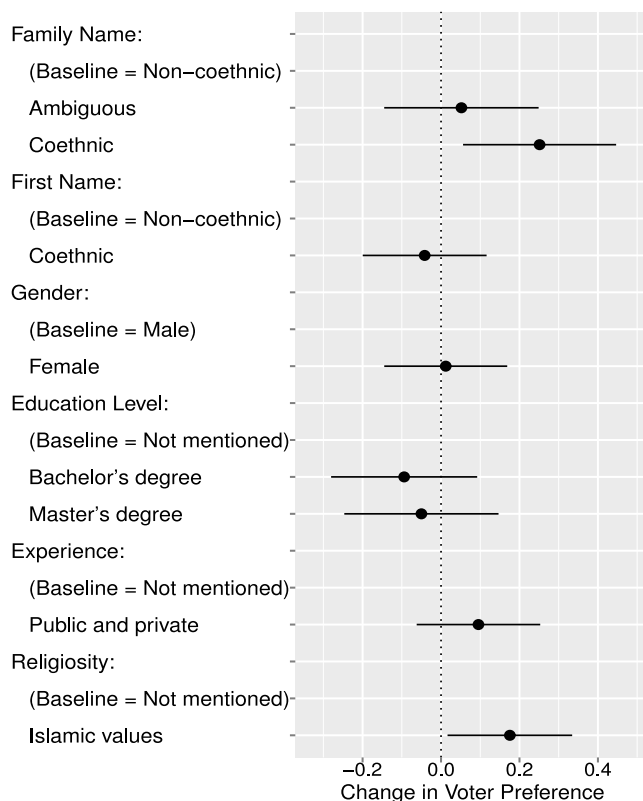


Fig. 1. Treatment effects on willingness to vote for candidate.

Table 2
Willingness to vote for the candidate, by first name.

	First name: Coethnic	First name: Non-coethnic
Last Name: Coethnic	0.193 (0.188)	0.311* (0.022)
Last Name: Ambiguous	0.123 (0.389)	-0.012 (0.933)
Gender: Female	-0.126 (0.286)	0.148 (0.176)
Education: Bachelor's	-0.046 (0.754)	-0.024 (0.857)
Education: Master's	-0.003 (0.986)	-0.108 (0.417)
Govt. experience: Mentioned	0.151 (0.201)	0.039 (0.722)
Islamic values: Mentioned	0.283* (0.018)	0.065 (0.553)
N	338	345

Probabilities reported in parentheses below AMCE estimates. Baselines are consistent with Fig. 1.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Two-tailed test.

¹¹ In most cases, the baseline was set to the pure control scenario in which a particular treatment was not mentioned in the candidate profile. For both name treatments, the baseline was set to the non-coethnic name to correspond to the expectation of a positive effect of coethnic identity.

¹² Such a conclusion is also suggested by the apparently higher incidence of item nonresponse for this treatment condition, with 14 percent of respondents saying ‘Don’t know’ or refusing to answer, compared to lower proportions for the coethnic (11 percent) and non-coethnic (8 percent) family names. This difference is significant at the $p = 0.07$ level.

¹³ More specifically, if the first name signals a coethnic, then a corroborating coethnic last name does not cause the respondent to fundamentally update (change) her view about the coethnic identity of the candidate, and so a strong last name treatment effect (AMCE) is not observed in this case. However, if a coethnic last name contradicts an initial inference of non-coethnicity due to a non-coethnic first name, then the respondent must significantly update her understanding of the candidate’s ethnic identity, from a potential non-coethnic to a near-certain coethnic, thus producing the more significant last name treatment effect reported in Table 2.

other information they received about the candidate’s identity. Among candidate profiles with the coethnic first name, the candidate religiosity treatment was positively and significantly related to voting likelihood, whereas candidates assigned the non-coethnic first name did not benefit from being more religious. The latter is additional evidence that ascriptive identity shapes vote choice and that given and family names act as proxies for these social identities. Still, this analysis does not allow us to fully probe the effect of varying levels of ascriptive information on voter preferences.

6.2. Identity, information and voter preferences

The preceding analysis suggests that Qatari voters prefer to vote for coethnics, that they use candidates’ names to make judgments

about their likely ethnicity, and that candidates' first and last names contribute differently to the overall strength of the signal of ascriptive information. As the far less permeable descent category, family name is hypothesized to be a highly certain signal of coethnic status, and only if this piece of information is unavailable will a voter base her judgment instead on the other, less reliable piece of information, namely given name. Fig. 2 visualizes this effect of coethnic signal strength on predicted vote outcome, based on the results of an ordered logistic regression. It depicts the estimated probability that a voter is "very likely" and "very unlikely", respectively, to support a candidate, as the certainty of coethnic identity increases.¹⁴ The name combinations are ordered based on the clarity that they provide to the respondent about the candidate's identity and range from a highly certain non-coethnic (N + N) on the left-hand side of the figure to a highly certain coethnic (C + C) on the right.

As Fig. 2 illustrates, voters in Qatar form a significant positive preference for a candidate only when the last name provides an unambiguous coethnic signal and, to a much lesser extent, when a coethnic first name is the only available ascriptive information. Whereas the strongest coethnic signal is associated with a highly significant 25 percentage point premium ($p < 0.001$) in the probability of a "very likely" versus a "very unlikely" vote, this estimated difference in outcomes is only 14 percentage points and marginally significant ($p = 0.067$) for the strongest non-coethnic signal. While Qataris thus remain on average equally likely than not to vote for a candidate whose name indicates a non-coethnic, only clear coethnic signals elicit a qualitative positive preference. This same divergence can be observed in comparing predicted vote outcomes for the two combinations including the ambiguous family name (i.e., N + A vs. C + A), and it is consistent with a mechanism of coethnic favoritism as predicted by social identity theory, rather than out-group bias due to symbolic racism/sectarianism. Finally, the predicted probability of being "very likely" to vote for the candidate with the coethnic first and last name (C + C) is not statistically different ($p = 0.751$) from that of the candidate with the non-coethnic first name and the coethnic last name (N + C). This is further evidence that family names provide clear and meaningful ethnic signals to voters who update their preferences accordingly.

6.3. Priming identity

Moving beyond the question of overall voting likelihood, we now compare the effect of coethnicity on candidate qualification ratings across four distinct policy areas. One domain – promoting religious values – was selected specifically to prime respondents to consider the candidate's ethnic identity, since the relevant distinction between a coethnic and non-coethnic revolves around descent-based religious denomination. Fig. 3 depicts the AMCEs for the coethnic last name as compared to certain non-coethnics. The values can be interpreted as the effect of coethnicity in the respective areas. As Fig. 3 shows, coethnicity has a more positive effect in the case of promoting religious values than in any other substantive domain. This is consistent with the idea that coethnic candidates are believed to possess the requisite religious values shared by coethnics. Coethnicity also has a positive impact on assessments in the areas of economics, environment, and education, which carry no clear sectarian connotations. Although these effects are weaker than in the case of the religious sphere and lack the

¹⁴ Note that the predicted probabilities depicted in Fig. 2 differ from the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) presented in Table 2. The AMCEs report how much more (or less) willing a respondent is to vote for a candidate with a coethnic last name, given their first name. Meanwhile, Fig. 2 presents overall estimates of how likely (or unlikely) Qataris are to vote for a candidate, given the combination of their first and last name. Additionally, the AMCEs are averaged across response categories of the dependent variable, while Fig. 2 focuses on the more substantively meaningful categories of "very likely" and "very unlikely" to vote for the candidate.

Table 3
Selected treatment effects, by respondent Islamist orientation.

Treatment	Less Islamist	More Islamist
Last name: Coethnic	0.284† (0.079)	0.232† (0.068)
Last name: Ambiguous	-0.034 (0.843)	0.093 (0.463)
Islamic values: Mentioned	0.113 (0.403)	0.212* (0.042)
N	676	676

Subsample (N) are equal because the respondent-level covariate was interacted with all treatments. Probabilities reported in parentheses below AMCE estimates. Baselines are consistent with Fig. 1.

Significance levels: † $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$. Two-tailed test.

same statistical significance, the results suggest a generalized bias in favor of coethnics that substantially shapes how most citizens evaluate and select among political candidates.

6.4. Identity and support for religion in politics

So far the results of the experiment have shown that Qataris favor coethnics both as candidates in general and in promoting religious values in particular. But to what extent is this an indication that ethno-sectarian identity is linked to greater individual-level support for religion in politics? In other words, are electoral preferences in Qatar driven by social identity groupings per se, or by an Islamist orientation that prefers coethnic (*qua* cosectarian) politicians to promote a certain shared set of religious values in the public sphere?

To help distinguish between these potential interpretations, we conduct a subgroup analysis based on the respondent's reported preference for more religious politicians. Those who said that candidate religiosity is "very important" to their vote choice (62 percent; see Table 1) are here coded as "more Islamist", while all others comprise the category "less Islamist". Table 3 reports the AMCEs for candidate last name and religiosity on the respondent's willingness to vote conditional on Islamist orientation.¹⁵ Table 3 shows first that, unsurprisingly, more Islamist individuals preferred profiles containing the overt statement of candidate support for religious values, while the less Islamist subgroup did not. However, more Islamist respondents were *not* more likely than others to prefer coethnic candidates. In fact, they had a slightly weaker coethnic preference compared to their less Islamist counterparts, although this difference is not statistically significant. Thus, individual interest in promoting religion in politics in Qatar is not linked to in-group bias for coethnic-cum-cosectarian politicians as signaled by candidate name. This conclusion accords with the view that coethnic preferences are rooted in psycho-social values and norms rather than support for Islamist policies.

6.5. Assessing social desirability bias

How do the foregoing conclusions about coethnic voting in Qatar, based on the results of the survey experiment, compare to those solicited using traditional, direct survey questions? In short, the main substantive findings are in direct contradiction, illustrating the susceptibility of questions about voter preferences to social desirability bias. Fig. 4 presents the relative importance of candidate characteristics according to answers to the non-experimental questions. Overlapping error bars show that most differences in standard deviations are not statistically different, and demonstrate the difficulty of interpreting the non-experimental results. However, it is evident that a candidate's ascriptive affiliation – family/tribe – is cited as the least important

¹⁵ Only selected effects are presented for clarity. As elsewhere, the last name baseline is set to non-coethnic.

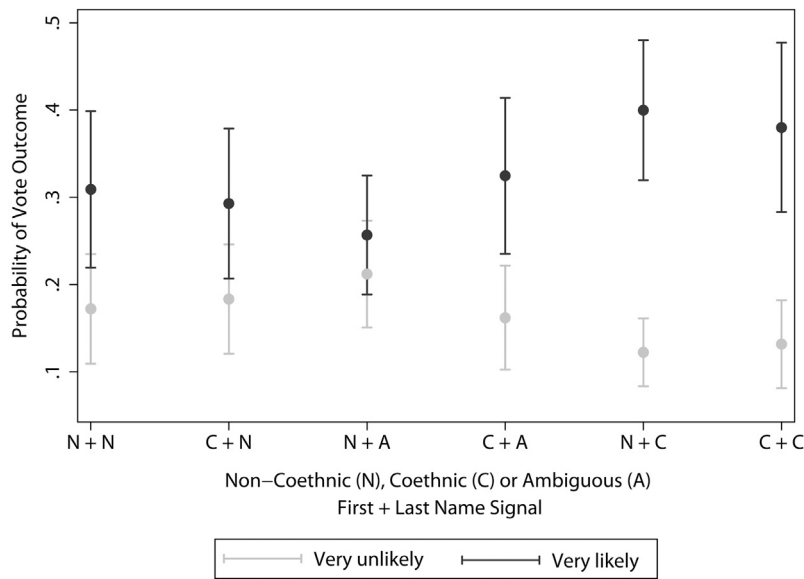


Fig. 2. Coethnic name signal strength and willingness to vote for candidate.

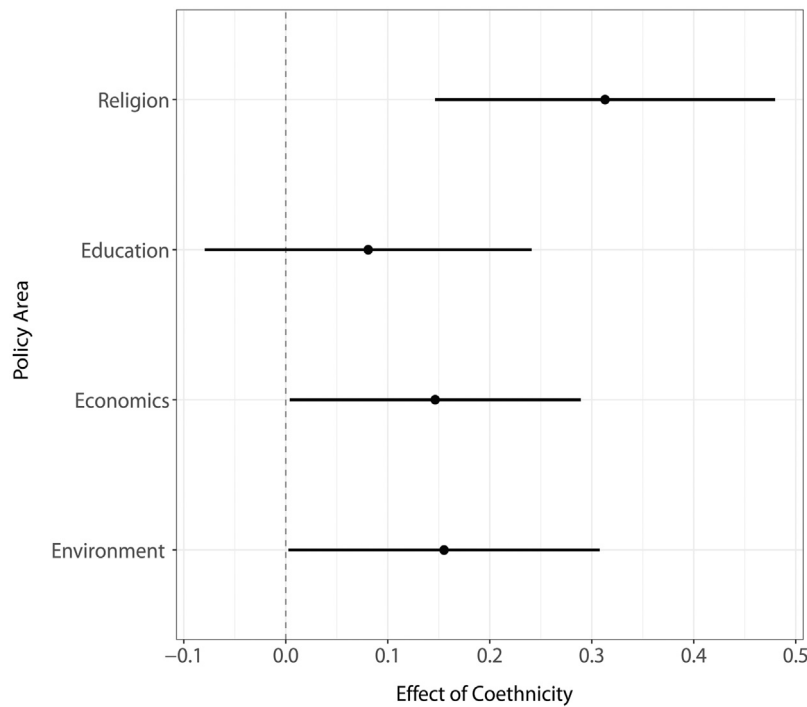


Fig. 3. Effect of identity on candidate qualification ratings in four areas.

candidate characteristic. This is of course in direct contradiction to the experimental results, which suggest that the candidate’s ethnic identity is the primary determinant of respondent evaluations and voting likelihood. In addition, the non-experimental results suggest that education is the most important factor to Qatari voters, but the experimental task fails to detect any significant impact of candidate education. The discrepancy suggests that survey participants are reluctant to express support for coethnics in response to direct questions, but indirect experimental treatments are more successful at capturing such preferences. This mirrors findings from Western and developing settings and reiterates the importance of using indirect modes to study sensitive topics in MENA surveys.

Notably, the positive impact of (coethnic) candidate religiosity is the only experimental result consistent with responses to the corresponding

direct survey item. Recall that 62 percent of Qataris indicated that candidate religiosity is a “very important” influence on their vote when asked directly. This correspondence further supports the conclusion that the discrepancy between direct and indirect survey results about the importance of candidates’ ascriptive characteristics is not due to respondents’ inability to interpret or answer questions accurately. Instead, the most likely explanation is that social desirability pressures cause survey respondents to systematically under-report the significance of ascriptive criteria that may appear backward or undemocratic, and overstate the importance of criteria, such as education and experience, that embody liberal ideas of fairness, meritocracy, and good governance. Because there is no stigma attached to religiosity in the highly conservative context of Qatar, it is not surprising, and indeed lends support to the conclusion here, that the experimental

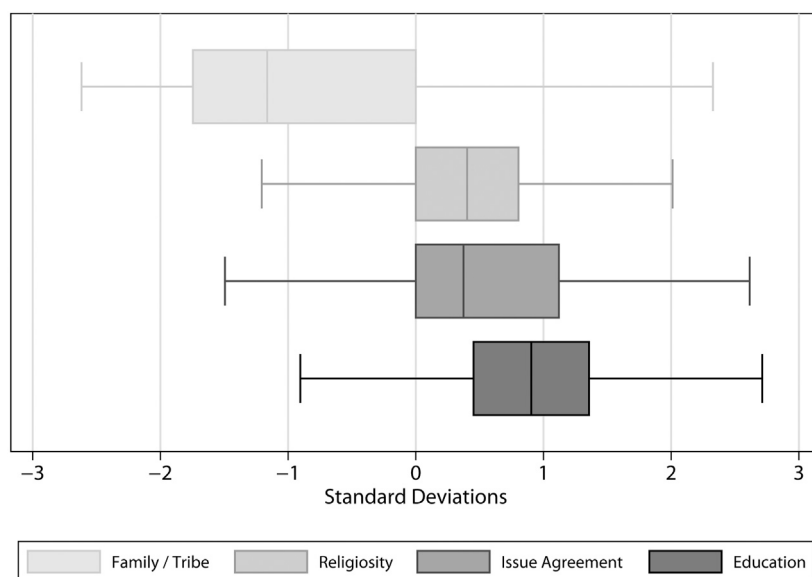


Fig. 4. Non-experimental questions: Relative importance of candidate attributes.

and non-experimental results agree on the importance of candidate religiosity.

7. Discussion

This study has presented novel experimental findings demonstrating that the ascriptive identities of electoral candidates shape voters' evaluations and behavior in Qatar. It shows how voters use observable attributes of candidates to infer ethnic information, and then use that information as the basis for judgments and voting decisions. That ethnic biases exist and drive electoral choices and outcomes is not a new finding for political science. But it does run contrary to the dominant paradigm of scholarly work on voting behavior in the Middle East and elsewhere in the developing world, which views clientelism as the key mechanism driving ethnic parties and voting. Previous research has neglected to fully examine the potential social bases of coethnic preferences in MENA elections, despite compelling theory and findings from the U.S., Africa, and other settings. This article begins to fill that gap.

Our results from Qatar show that ethnic-based preferences can exist in the Middle East even absent conditions promoting clientelism. In Qatar, ethnic diversity is demographically limited and politically irrelevant, and elected officials lack the authority to reward their voters. Nevertheless, Qataris exhibit a strong and consistent voting preference for coethnic candidates. Consistent with expectations derived from social identity theory, respondents appear to process "shades of identity" and favor candidate profiles that provide a strong signal of coethnic status. Also consistent with the framework, Qataris clearly favor coethnics over non-coethnics but do not exhibit negative prejudice against out-group members.

This positive preference for coethnics is accentuated in a policy domain that primes citizens to consider the candidate's sectarian identity, namely promoting religious values. Voters in Qatar may imagine that if a coethnic candidate is elected, she will uphold society's 'true' values, echoing conclusions from survey experiments conducted in the United States and Europe. However, analysis showed that in-group preferences are no stronger among Qataris with an Islamist political orientation, suggesting that they are not motivated by religious sentiment but an affinity for those of shared descent. Like citizens elsewhere, voters in Qatar appear to possess ethnic biases that are subtle and imply that in-group members are seen as meeting normative expectations about who should represent them in government.

Beyond these substantive results, a broader contribution of our work is to illustrate how the study and conceptualization of voting and other political behavior in the Arab world can be informed by insights from the Gulf subregion. The authoritarianism prevailing in the Arab Gulf monarchies poses barriers to the observation of politics and the collection of reliable opinion data. Such hindrances may suggest a lack of interesting political processes to examine or the practical impossibility of doing so. Yet, as demonstrated in our study, the atypical demographic, economic, and political character of the Arab Gulf states within the wider MENA region can be turned to the researcher's advantage, by ruling out mechanisms seen to operate elsewhere or by adding conditionalities to prevailing explanations.

Finally, our study demonstrates the difficulty of studying coethnic preferences in the Middle East and indeed elsewhere using surveys. The clear contradiction between the results of our experiment and answers to traditional, direct survey questions about the importance of candidate ethnicity to vote choice highlights the fact that respondents are unlikely to report their social biases openly. Estimating the effects of candidates' ethnic identities on voter preferences therefore requires a method that can simulate the complexity of candidate selection while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of social desirability bias. As shown here, the conjoint experiment allows researchers to create realistic candidate profiles and overcome respondent tendencies to provide socially acceptable answers.

Of course, findings from an investigation in any one MENA country cannot be assumed to characterize all MENA countries, and so caution is necessary when reflecting on the broader applicability of our results. Yet Qatar offers some important theoretical advantages as a venue for detecting coethnic preferences and their impact on voting behavior. These advantages are rooted in the low political salience of ethnic divisions and nonexistent distributional implications of Qatar's local elections, making Qatar a least-likely case for ethnic voting. Our work also extends the study of political behavior to the oil-rich, autocratic Arab Gulf states, a region that remains under-represented in scholarship on Arab political behavior in part due to lack of reliable public opinion data. Similar studies conducted in more ethnically-contested settings, and in places where greater material resources are at stake in elections, should yield even stronger evidence of ethnic-based voting preferences. But under such conditions the behavioral mechanisms underlying in-group preferences will be harder to disentangle, with incentives for clientelism operating alongside the impacts of social bias.

Ultimately, replication of the study in contexts that differ along these and other dimensions is necessary to elucidate the existence and

drivers of ethnic preferences under different electoral and social group configurations. This is required in spite of the difficulties inherent in studying ethnicity and elections in Arab states, especially in light of post-2011 authoritarian retrenchment and increased official scrutiny of political surveys. Here the conjoint approach is a particularly useful way of engaging this and other delicate topics in Arab societies, as its indirect mode of questioning helps assuage the concerns of both respondents and governments. At a time when ascriptive-based biases are increasingly shaping political outcomes both in the MENA region and around the world, the relationship between group preferences and political behavior is well worth revisiting. Prevailing conceptualizations of electoral behavior that focus on clientelism to the exclusion of social identity-based explanations must be expanded to make room for an increasingly complex reality.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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