Defining the "Tribal Advantage" in Kuwaiti Politics

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Abstract

Contemporary electoral discourses in Kuwait stress a "tribal advantage" that boosts the representation of tribe-affiliated Kuwaitis in the National Assembly and undermines the character of Kuwaiti democracy. We draw on survey data, elite interviews, and election returns to assess the validity of these claims. Kuwaiti responses in a survey of political attitudes cast doubt on the hypothesis that members of tribes are likelier to view voting as a quid-pro-quo exchange for government services. Election returns suggest a slight over-representation of tribe-affiliated Kuwaitis writ large, but as a result of the interaction of larger post-2006 electoral districts with tribal electoral coordination rather than as a result of government design. Additionally, electoral returns offer evidence of growing tribal coordination intended to ensure representation within the National Assembly, albeit one disrupted by changes in electoral laws. We conclude by highlighting the possibility of electoral appeals that build on, rather than restrict themselves to, ascriptive identities.

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Introduction

The small states of the Arabian Peninsula have often been subject to Egyptian diplomat Tahseen

Bashir's quip that they are little more than "tribes with flags."[1] Others have argued by contrast

that modern tribal identities are merely part of national "brands" built up and kept alive by self-

interested political elites.[2] However, despite frequent mention of "tribalism" in studies of politics

in the Gulf Arab monarchies, existing work rarely spells out the mechanisms by which tribal

identity influences contemporary political outcomes. This paper argues that tribes and tribal

affiliations within these monarchies supply a basis for political coordination in a region whose

governments have long militated against independent collective action.

We explore the interaction of tribal identity and elections in Kuwait, the only state among

the Arab Gulf monarchies which, through its elected, relatively independent legislature, has

meaningful institutionalized political participation. Kuwaiti citizens consistently view their

political system as a democracy, as well as viewing democracy as appropriate for their country.[3]

Kuwait's tribes, like the country's ideologically driven political blocs, have maintained their

political standing in electoral politics through informal institutions like *dīwāniyyāt* meetings and

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[1] Neil MacFarquhar, "Tahseen Bashir, Voice of Tolerance in Egypt, Dies at 77," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2002, https://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/13/obituaries/tahseen-bashir-voice-of-tolerance-in-egypt-dies-at-77.html.
[2] Frauke Heard-Bey, "The Tribal Society of the UAE and Its Traditional Economy," in *United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*, ed. Ibrahim al-Abed (London: Trident Press, 2001), 101; Miriam Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2014).
[3] In the Arab Barometer waves III and V (the two waves that included Kuwait), Kuwaiti respondents reported the highest combined values of believing their country is a democracy and that democracy is suitable for their country in population-weighted averages.

(technically illegal) electoral "primaries" to determine which candidates will receive the tribe's backing in parliamentary elections.[4]

Such tribal identities and institutions are easier to entrench than erode. While past patterns of welfare provision or state employment on a tribal basis reinforced the incentives to identify and coordinate with one's tribe, attempts to dilute the strength of these identities by altering formal institutions (such as electoral laws) confront constituencies equipped with the means to counteract these changes. Formerly pro-government segments of Kuwait's nominally "tribal" population have become more politically independent, particularly since 2006, even as government officials have tried to limit tribal influence. Nevertheless, Kuwait's tribes have persisted as influential actors in electoral contestation for Arab Gulf region's most politically powerful legislature. Kuwait's tribes are best understood not as clients of the state, as has been posited elsewhere, but rather as political blocs with some of the organizational tools utilized by political parties to regulate electoral competition in pursuit of legislative influence.

To better understand how these organizational tools structure tribal participation in Kuwaiti elections, we identify and test existing hypotheses about tribal politics in Kuwait. We seek to utilize the full range of available data in Kuwait to study the interaction of ascriptive identities, electoral institutions, and political entrepreneurs, including recent public opinion data from the Arab Barometer, data on all regular elections since 1991 from Michael Herb's Kuwait Politics Database, fieldwork in Kuwait, and media coverage of elections. Public opinion polling provides a broader measure of "what tribes want" than select interviews; elections data allows us

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[4] A *dīwāniyya* (pl. *dīwāniyyāt*) is an informal meeting, which has long been a part of Kuwaiti political life. Such gatherings, hosted by members of the ruling family, politicians, and private individuals are most often convened in homes and cover topics ranging from social life to religious ideology to politics.

to compare perceptions of over- or under-representation with a more objective baseline, and case studies allow us to compare specific aspects of individual political actors' behavior with prevailing expectations.

The first hypothesis we test is the suggestion that Kuwait's tribal citizens hold a more transactional view of democracy than their counterparts, valuing it only in terms of the material benefits it provides them – a claim for which we find no evidence in available data.

The second hypothesis we test is that tribes are over-represented in the Kuwaiti parliament, despite various changes in electoral law, as is the popular perception. To that end, we find that while tribes may be slightly over-represented in the abstract, this derives from tribes being *overrepresented* by the number of winning candidates where their votes are *underrepresented* by district size (i.e. tribe-heavy districts have more voters per parliamentary representative). Since its post-1991 restoration, the Kuwaiti parliament has exhibited much greater inequality of representation across tribes rather than between tribes and non-tribal Kuwaitis, with smaller tribes typically fielding few or no winning candidates.

We also test whether tribes' capacity for coordinating members' actions plays a significant role in explaining electoral outcomes across Kuwait's changing electoral systems. Examining voting patterns within areas that came to make up Kuwait's five present-day electoral districts, we find some evidence of improving tribal vote coordination from 1992 to 2006, with fewer and fewer candidates affiliated with larger tribes running in order to avoid "splitting the vote." However, the mid-2012 imposition of a Single Non-Transferrable Vote (SNTV) electoral system disproportionately undermined the ability of larger tribes to coordinate candidate entry – as we would expect if tribes functioned akin to parties.

We further present a brief case study of Kuwaiti opposition figure Musallam al-Barrak, demonstrating that electoral appeals to ascriptive identity can be the foundation of broader coalition-building. We conclude by discussing the implications of our work for political strategies in Kuwait and by suggesting further means of testing and substantiating our claims.

Tribes and Politics in the Arab Gulf States

Tribes and tribal affiliations are widely recognized as playing a role in the politics of the rentier states of the GCC, though little scholarship has unpacked the mechanisms through which tribal identity affects political outcomes. Even defining what constitutes a "tribe" is a deeply contested subject, given the potential for individuals to identify either with smaller entities centered around extended families or broad confederations spanning national boundaries.[5] Across the Middle East and North Africa, tribes can imply both a shared identity based on common ancestry and social structures that can serve as substitutes to (or complements of) the modern state in providing welfare and ensuring public order.[6]

While some concrete demographic and social differences distinguish tribes from each other and from urban citizens (e.g., the size of relevant kinship networks or value for particular social practices), these differences have been reinforced and institutionalized through state-led

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[5] We place tribal identity under Chandra's equation of ethnicity as "descent-based attributes" such as language or skin color. Kanchan Chandra, "What is Ethnic Identity and Does it Matter?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, 9 (2006): 397-424.

[6] Lisa Anderson, *The State and Social Transformation in Tunisia and Libya, 1830-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Richard Tapper, "Anthropologists, Historians, and Tribespeople On Tribe and State Formation in the Middle East," in *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, eds. Phillip Khouri and Joseph Kostiner (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 303-312.

efforts to legitimize and stabilize political regimes.[7] This is not to suggest that tribal identity is simply a modern reinvention, with outdated markers of authentic "tribal" status instrumentalized by rulers eager to reinforce national symbols and popular obedience.[8] Rather, the reification of tribal ties is a political strategy by the region's rulers that can have unintended consequences for the overall practice of politics in the GCC.

Tribal organizations permit rulers to co-opt or bargain with hierarchical and relatively cohesive groups rather than contend with a range of unpredictable individuals. Typically based outside of countries' urban centers, tribes have often provided key support to rulers facing contentious urban politics, as in Kuwait.[9] At the same time, however, these kinship networks also afford their members a degree of political leverage within these states – particularly where regimes allow for a modicum of pluralism. If state policies can more easily make than break the strength of these associational ties, it is logical that the organizing power embedded within extended family structures can come to challenge government priorities.[10]

Still, the tribal character of societies in the Arabian Peninsula is rarely analyzed outside of broad suggestions of a fixed bargain between tribe and state, save in countries with weak central governments like Yemen. When state structures break down, al-Dawsari argues, "the

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[7] Evan Lieberman and Prerna Singh, "Measuring the State's Institutionalization of Ethnic Categories Across Time and Space," *Newsletter of the Qualitative and Mixed Methods Sections of the American Political Science Association*, 7, no. 1 (2009): 29-35.

[8] Cooke, *Tribal Modern*.

[9] Sean Yom, "Tribal Politics in Contemporary Jordan: The Case of the Hirak Movement," *The Middle East Journal*, 68, no. 2 (2014): 229-247.

[10] See Scott Weiner, "Enduring Authority: Kinship, Tribalism, and State Formation in the Arab Gulf" (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 2016). For other examples of how state policies in the Gulf can provide the basis for opposition, see Gwenn Okruhlik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 3 (1999): 295-315; Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

tribes in Yemen provide social order outside the formal system … they provide basic rule of law in the form of conflict resolution and regulation."[11] Because the GCC monarchies have relatively strong, wealthy, and capable central governments, tribes are rarely called on to directly provide social welfare or enforce social order. Instead, in much the same way that Islamist groups in the Arab Gulf have sought to take advantage of state resources to advance political projects, tribal networks have evolved to help their members take advantage of state largesse when rulers prove generous and challenge government authority when they prove otherwise.[12]

As we argue in the case of Kuwait, it is not the mere existence of tribal identity but the development and maintenance of informal institutions of coordination and networking based on a shared sense of identity that have provided tribes with ongoing political advantages. For Kuwaiti sociologist Khaldoun al-Naqeeb al-Naqeeb, tribal identification allows for "group cohesion," constitutes "an organizing principle" that can motivate and mobilize members, and harbors "a general (popular) mentality, which governs all forms of political relation."[13] While some Kuwaiti commentators can focus on this third aspect – how a "tribal mentality," or a desire to accrue benefits solely for one's own constituents, is incompatible with democracy – we argue that these first two observable features help us understand how the informal institutions of tribal life interact with the formal institutions of representative (or unrepresentative) rule.[14]

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[11] Nadwa al-Dawsari, "Tribal Governance and Stability in Yemen," *Carnegie Papers* 4 (April 2012), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen_tribal_governance.pdf.

[12] Courtney Freer, *Rentier Islamism: The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gulf Monarchies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[13] Khaldoun al-Naqeeb, "Political Tribalism and Legitimacy in the Arab Peninsula," (paper presented to Council on Foreign Relations, January 1992), 3.

[14] Shafeeq Ghabra described this as a concern with the "desertification" of Kuwaiti politics and society in "Kuwait and the Dynamics of Socio-Economic Change," *Middle East Journal* 51, no. 3 (1997): 358-372.

Tribal Politics and the *Ḥaḍar-Badū* Divide

Kuwait is an anomaly in the GCC, a wealthy rentier state that nevertheless has a vocal parliament historically containing political blocs ranging from Salafis to secular leftists as well as several tribal groups. The organizational capacity of various social groups is thus openly reflected in election outcomes rather than hidden in the outcomes of quiet, back-room appeals.[15] Despite the existence of both Sunni and Shi'i Kuwaitis, as well as a sizeable population of disenfranchised expatriate workers, perhaps the major cleavage in Kuwaiti politics exists between fully urbanized long-time citizens (*ḥaḍar*) and more recently naturalized tribal figures (*badū*, or bedouin).[16] While a *ḥaḍar* is a Kuwaiti "whose forefathers lived in Kuwait before the launch of the oil era (1946) and worked as traders, sailors, fishermen, and pearl divers,"[17] *badū* (a term we use interchangeably with tribal to describe tribal members of the Kuwaiti population) are often defined as "immigrants, mostly from Saudi Arabia, who used to live on animal pastoralism" and moved to Kuwait between 1960 and 1980.[18] Even among such tribes, however, some like the Mutayri are considered more recent arrivals than tribes like the ʿAzimi or ʿAjman.

With citizenship laws having emphasized differences between citizens based on when their families arrived in Kuwait, this division has become more entrenched through geographic

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[15] Michael Herb, "Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates," in *Politics and Society in the Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Michele Penner Angrist (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010), 339.

[16] A significant and politically active Shiʿi minority also exists within Kuwait, comprising some 25 percent of the population. While there are some Shiʿi members of tribes, we focus primarily on Sunni Kuwaitis for ease of comparison. For more on social cleavages within Kuwaiti politics, see Luciano Zaccara, Courtney Freer, and Hendrik Kraetzschmar, "Kuwait's Islamist Proto-Parties and the Arab Uprisings: Between Opposition Politics, Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Cross-Ideological Cooperation," in *Islamists and the Politics of the Arab Uprisings: Governance, Pluralisation and Contention*, eds. Hendrik Kraetzschmar and Paola Rivetti (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

[17] Anh Nga Longva, "Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise: The Discourse on Hadhar and Bedu in Kuwait," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38, no. 2 (2006): 172.

[18] Ibid.

separation that has reinforced social divisions. Indeed, state housing policies between the 1950s and 1980s physically divided the *ḥaḍar* and *badū*.[19] Members of the *badū* population tended to be moved to "self-contained" communities outside the center of Kuwait City, thereby making it unnecessary for them to mix with the *ḥaḍar* population, who mainly lived in the city center.[20] In peripheral areas, members of the tribal population received state services of lower quality and smaller housing plots than did city dwellers, with access healthcare and education not guaranteed until the end of the 1980s.[21]

Despite this history of underdevelopment, tribal communities today are considered more reliant on the state, and on the ruling family, for their survival than urban communities are. Indeed, they are considered over-represented in public employment, particularly in the military, with more members of the *ḥaḍar* population tending to work in the private sector as members of Kuwait's entrenched merchant class. Some urbanized Kuwaitis consider the more recently naturalized segments of the tribal population to be less committed to the very concept of a democratic nation-state and to be fundamentally less Kuwaiti.[22] Writing in the 1980s, Longva notes a sense among urban communities that "a critical attitude toward the government is an important feature in the definition of *ḥaḍar* identity. In contrast, *badū* are said to revere governmental authority, with their attitudes towards the ruling family described by several *ḥaḍar* as 'obsequious hand kissing.' *Badū*, they say, are brought in "to serve the government's purposes."[23] Since this time, the interests of the merchant population have grown increasingly

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[19] Farah al-Nakib, "Revisiting Ḥaḍar and Badū in Kuwait: Citizenship, Housing, and the Construction of a Dichotomy," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 46, no. 1 (2014): 14-15.
[20] Ibid., 21.
[21] Ibid., 21.
[22] Longva, "Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise," 173.
[23] Ibid., 173. Transliteration modified.

linked to the government as tribal populations are associated more and more with the political

opposition. Indeed, al-Nakib explains (in revisiting Longva's observations) that "maintaining the

badū's long-term loyalty was impossible as the same policies [that afforded them state resources]

made them an excluded and marginalized group in Kuwaiti society," in turn providing the basis

for tribal opposition since the 1980s.[24] As a result, tribal quiescence can no longer be taken for

granted.

Electoral districting has intersected with the political split between the *ḥaḍar* and *badū*,

leading to charges that tribal populations are intentionally overrepresented in parliament. There

have been three major changes to Kuwaiti electoral law, at least two of which have been

associated with augmenting or curbing tribal parliamentary power. The first was instituted in

advance of the 1981 elections, when then-Amir Shaykh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah increased the

number of electoral districts from ten (with five representatives each) to twenty-five (with two

representatives each). The 1980 law was said to have "effectively consolidated the trend of

tribalism" by allowing for greater representation among (often tribe-affiliated) government

loyalists – while curbing vocal opposition from (typically more urban) liberal MPs.[25] The share

of seats won by *badū* candidates accordingly rose from nineteen in the 1963 polls to twenty-

seven in 1985.[26]

The second major change, prompted by popular opposition agitation under the banner of

the Nabīha Khamsa ("We Want Five") movement, led to a formal decrease in the number of

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[24] Al-Nakib, "Revisiting Ḥaḍar and Badū," 8, 25.
[25] Kamal Eldin Osman Salih, "Kuwait Primary (Tribal) Elections 1975-2008: An Evaluative Study," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 2 (2011): 148-152; Courtney Freer, "Clients or Challengers?: Tribal Constituents in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2019): 9.
[26] Ibid.

electoral districts from twenty-five (two seats each) to five (ten seats each) in the 2008 election.

This change was intended to diminish opportunities for vote-buying, since previously a seat

could be won with as little as a thousand votes. Activists believed this would reduce the number

of candidates elected with tacit government assistance – "service members," or *nawāb al-*

khadamāt – and reduce the role of ascriptive identities (including tribal ties) in the election of

candidates.[27] Almost immediately, however, electoral results raised observers' concerns that

subsequent national assemblies were "overwhelmingly Islamists and tribal" and that "tribalism

and sectarianism were [still] strong during … campaigns."[28]

The third major change, instituted by Amir Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah in 2012,

decreased the number of votes per person from four to one, thus putting in place a single non-

transferrable vote (SNTV) system. This system, described in greater detail below, was thought to

strengthen representation for traditionally loyalist blocs at the expense of broad-based ideological

blocs and tribal groupings, sparking an opposition boycott of subsequent elections until 2016.

Tribal Electoral Practices

In recent years, tribal constituencies have demonstrated a growing self-awareness of their

clout as powerful voting blocs. At one extreme, in the words of a Kuwaiti scholar, tribal

affiliations might serve as "political parties you're born into."[29] For their part, however, many

ḥaḍar seem to consider tribal political activity evidence of a so-called tribal mentality, which

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[27] Hamad Albloshi and Faisal Alfahad, "The Orange Movement of Kuwait: Civic Pressure Transforms a Political System," in *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East*, ed. Maria Stephan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 221.

[28] Ibid., 229.

[29] Interview with Kuwaiti academic, London, 13 June 2018.

they describe as the rent-seeking desire to gain more services and goods for tribal constituencies, at the expense of others and to the detriment of the political system; they fear that such a mentality can seep into other aspects of politics, reducing parliament to a distributive institution rather than a space for genuine political debate.[30]

These tribes vary widely in terms of the votes they represent among the Kuwaiti electorate. While it is hard to come by accurate data over time of how many Kuwaitis are affiliated with which tribes and where they live, the online newspaper *al-Haqiqa* estimated the number of voters belonging to different ethnic and tribal blocs for each of the country's five electoral districts in 2016 as roughly 48 percent of eligible voters in 2016.[31] The two largest tribes are the ʿAzimi and Mutayri tribes, each with over forty thousand voters (>8 percent of electorate), while the Rushayda, ʿAjman, and ʿAnaza tribes each have over twenty thousand voters (4-5 percent of the electorate). Voters from the ʿUtayba, Shammar, Bani Hajar, and Dhufayr tribes each represent over five thousand voters (1 percent) from the Kuwaiti electorate, while yet-smaller tribes (such as the Dawsari, the Harb, and the Murra) consist of even fewer members.

For ease of comparison, we discuss the ʿAzimi and Mutayri as "large" or the "largest" tribal groupings (>forty thousand voters); the Rushayda, ʿAjman, and ʿAnaza as "medium" or "mid-sized" tribes (>twenty thousand voters); and the remainder as "smaller" tribes. With the exception of a few of the smallest tribes (<2,500 voting citizens each), 75 percent or more of each tribe's voting members were residents of electoral Districts IV (127,000 voters) or V

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[30] Multiple interviews, Kuwait City, November 2017.
[31] "ʿAdad al-nakhibin fi al-dawaʾir al-intikhabiyya wa furuʿ al-qabaʾil wa al-hadhar wa al-shʿia 2016," *Jaridat Al-Haqiqa*, October 18, 2016, http://www.alhakea.com/word/?p=216400.

(135,500 voters).[32] Due to imbalances in the number of voters per district, a vote from either of these districts is "worth" less than half of a vote from District II (the smallest district, with a little over sixty thousand).
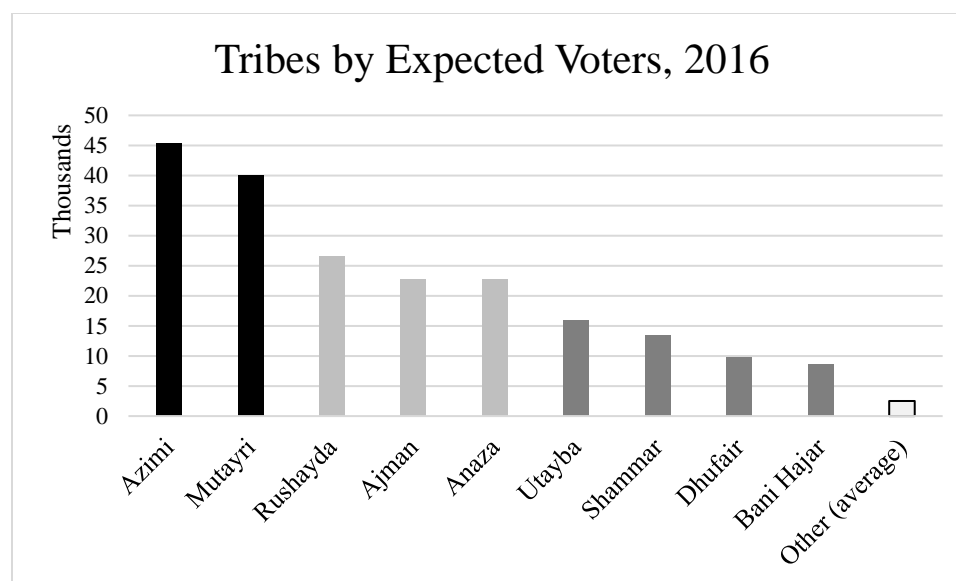

Figure 1: Number of tribal voters for each of Kuwait's main tribes, 2016. Source: al-Haqiqa, 2016.

In a state where political parties are technically banned, it is logical for tribes to take on some of the roles traditionally filled by these organizations: substituting tribal identity for a party "brand" and regulating competition in the general election to prevent vote-splitting. As close-knit social entities, "tribes have greater capabilities [than non-tribal Kuwaitis] in terms of organizing themselves and in coordinating between the different candidates to agree upon the tribe's representative in the parliamentary elections."[33] Facilitating this coordination is the fact that members of the same tribe tend to be concentrated in specific residential areas and electoral districts.

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[32] "Iʿalan Nataʾij Intikhabat Majlis al-Umma al-Kuwait," *al-Akhbar al-Yowm*, November 27, 2016, https://m.akhbarelyom.com/news/newdetails/596064/1/.

[33] Salih, "Kuwait Primary (Tribal) Elections," 142.

Since the 1970s, tribal *dīwāniyyāt* have hosted primary elections some two months ahead of the official parliamentary polls.[34] Leading up to the polls, tribal leaders establish committees to recruit and announce candidates, as well as to run and count primary votes. Members then cast their votes, with each allotted two, at a separate meeting of the *dīwāniyya*, after which the top two are declared winners.[35] Once the winning candidates are announced, tribe members pledge their support in the elections for these figures. Such activities have become advanced with new technology, as tribe members can cast votes via text message or by taking photos casting their votes with telephone cameras.[36]

Other political blocs have learned from the apparent advantage conferred by tribal primaries. The Kuwait Democratic Forum and Salafi Community created primaries in the 2000s on the basis of tribes' experience; Shiʿi groups have done the same.[37] Non-tribal political blocs tend not to announce their candidates until after tribal primaries have been completed, however, in an effort to determine their prospects of winning in tribal constituencies.[38] Still, liberal or independent candidates have typically opposed primaries on grounds that they encourage representation of specific tribes rather than of electoral constituencies as a whole, undermining democracy in Kuwait by promoting a "tribal" rather than democratic political mentality.[39] As one politically active interviewee from the *ḥaḍar* community put it, "*badū* vote for their candidate,

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[34] Ibid., 146.

[35] Al-ʿAnazi, Ghazi. "Farʿiyyāt al-qabaʾil…tasfiyyat dimuqratiyya fi nazar al-bʿad wa jarima fi-haq al-watan wa al-qanun lada al-akharin," *Al-Raʿi*, April 9, 2009. https://www.alraimedia.com/ampArticle/108362

[36] Saʿdi, Jihad. "intikhabat al-farʿiyyat bil-kuwayt taqlid qibali tuḥaẓiruhu al-hukuma," Al-Jazeera, March 3, 2008. https://www.aljazeera.net/news/reportsandinterviews/2008/3/24/انتخابات-الفرعيات-بالكويت-تقليد-قبلي

[37] Salih, "Kuwait Primary (Tribal) Elections," 147.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 153.

even if he's a piece of wood."[40] Even within tribes, several youth activists and former Members

of Parliament (MPs) have in recent years spoken out against tribal primaries and refused to take

part in them. [41] Kuwaiti interviewees also report that there is today more emphasis on various

family branches (known in Arabic as *al-fakhadhīn,* lit. "thighs") of the tribes rather than merely

the tribe itself, leading to a splintering of votes (particularly among larger tribes).[42]

The Kuwaiti government has periodically taken action against tribal primaries, raising

questions about their efficacy and formally outlawing them in 1998.[43] Tribal leaders protested

this crackdown in the 2008 and 2009 electoral campaigns but have continued to face pressure in

preserving this informal institution, spurring something of a sea change in tribal politics. Yet the

Kuwaiti state is far from unified in its efforts to disrupt tribal maneuvering, as several tribe-

affiliated candidates reportedly sought and obtained guarantees from influential figures in the

security services to avoid interference in the 2016 tribal primaries.[44] Furthermore, in the lead-up

to the 2020 elections Kuwaiti commentators noted that the Ministry of Interior was slow to act in

actually disrupting the tribal primaries that the government had asserted were "criminal."[45]

Claims and Evidence

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[40] Interview with Kuwaiti political scientist, Kuwait City, November 8, 2017.

[41] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Kuwait's Tribal Primaries: Eroding an Older Order?" *Hurst*, January 31, 2013, https://www.hurstpublishers.com/kuwaits-tribal-primaries-eroding-an-older-order/.

[42] Interview with Kuwaiti academic, Kuwait City, April 15, 2019.

[43] Mary Ann Tétreault, "Political Activism in Kuwait: Reform in Fits and Starts," in *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism,* eds. Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 281-2.

[44] Khaled al-Khaldi, "Al-Faraʿiyyāt al-Tamahidia … Intikhabat ma qabl al-Intikhabat fi-l-Kuwait," *al-Arabi al-Jadid*, November 26, 2016, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2016/11/25/-الفرعيات-التمهيدية انتخابات-ما-قبل-الانتخابات-في-الكويت.

[45] Mohamed Ibrahim, "Al-intikhabat al-farʿiyyat badʿat … ʿala ʿayn al-hukuma!" *al-Qabas*, September 5, 2020, https://alqabas.com/article/5798616-الانتخابات-الفرعية-بدأت-على-عين-الحكومة.

To understand the so-called tribal advantage in Kuwaiti politics, we investigate three primary claims about the role of tribal identity in Kuwaiti political participation.

H1: There is a marked difference in attitudes towards democracy and democratic participation between Kuwaitis who claim a tribal affiliation and those who do not.

Members of Kuwait's tribes are often held to a) view democracy as a transaction of material goods for support rather than an embodiment of individual liberties and freedoms; some political observers in Kuwait therefore view the growing presence of members of parliament with a tribal affiliation as undermining the spirit of democracy in the country.[46] We would also expect tribe-affiliated voters to b) place greater emphasis on the tribal or family background of candidates rather than their merits. Furthermore, if political participation by tribe-affiliated voters is motivated largely by material considerations, we should c) see citizens' material grievances vis-à-vis the Kuwaiti government correlate with increased political activity, with this relationship d) especially strong for tribe-affiliated citizens.

H2: Tribes are over-represented within the parliament, and this over-representation has grown over time with the introduction of larger electoral districts in 2006 and the SNTV system in 2012.

We would expect to see tribal-affiliated candidates consistently garner a greater share in parliament than both a) the share of tribe-affiliated citizens in the Kuwaiti electorate and b) the vote share they attract overall. In other words, we might see candidates with tribal ties occupy sixty percent of seats in the parliament despite tribal candidates garnering only fifty percent of

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[46] Interviews with Kuwaiti political scientists at Kuwait University, 3 May 2018.

the vote or representing around fifty percent of the Kuwaiti electorate. Furthermore, we should observe c) the degree of overrepresentation increasing over time.

H3: If tribes function akin to political parties, and the informal institutions of tribes afford them an "electoral advantage" over non-tribal candidates, predictions for the effects of electoral institutions on party competition should apply to competition of various tribal blocs.

We test our third hypothesis, that tribal primaries and other tribal institutions help account for a "tribal advantage" at the polls by serving as a basis for party-like organization, against the record of changes in Kuwait's electoral system in 2006 and 2012. If tribes learn to rely on informal tribal institutions to coordinate tribal voting behavior, we should a) observe tribal votes being concentrated behind fewer and fewer candidates between 1992 and 2006 – whether because tribes are preventing candidates from running (in which case the total number of candidates should decline as well) or coordinating votes once candidacies have been announced. Additionally, if the advantage of tribe-affiliated candidates lies in coordination more than changes of the sizes of electoral districts, we should observe b) little effect of the 2006 consolidation of Kuwait's electoral districts from 25 to five (in evidence for the first time in the 2008 polls) on tribal representation, despite having been prompted by *ḥaḍar* activists' calls for more "balanced" representation vis-a-vis tribes. Tribes extend across the boundaries of the previous 25-district electoral map, meaning their ability to spread information about desirable candidates (and coordinate four votes to that effect) is unimpeded and potentially enhanced.

Existing work on the study of electoral institutions suggests that the move to an SNTV system in 2012, however, should have limited the ability of larger tribes to coordinate behind particular candidates. The SNTV system raises the likelihood of "misallocating" votes for parties

(and especially large parties) in multi-party elections – in other words, spreading support for the party as a whole behind too many candidates.[47] There is reason to believe a similar dynamic holds for tribes seeking to coordinate votes behind particular candidates. In Jordan, for example, Buttorf finds that "coordination failure among tribes … [was] the norm" under the country's the SNTV system.[48] Yet the substantial variation in the size of Kuwait's tribal blocs – ranging from nearly ten percent of the electorate in 2016 (i.e. ʿAzimi) to less than one percent (i.e. Dawsari) – poses much greater coordination problems for larger tribes.[49] Smaller tribes should remain more effective at coordinating votes of members than non-tribal candidates, meaning that tribes as a whole will continue to garner a similar portion of seats in tribe-heavy Districts IV and V. We therefore expect to observe c) a breakdown in coordination behind particular candidates in the largest tribes within each district, as well as greater representation of smaller tribes relative to larger tribes in the elections after SNTV.

Data and Sources

We rely on two sources of evidence to test our three major claims, supplemented with in-person interviews with politically active members of the *ḥaḍar* and tribal populations conducted during several trips in and around Kuwait City between Fall 2016 and April 2019. First, to look at individual attitudes towards democracy and electoral participation, we examine polling data from the third wave of the Arab Barometer gathered in Kuwait in 2014. The poll asks a number of

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[47] Matthew Shugart and Rein Taagepera, *Votes from Seats: Logical Models of Electoral Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 215-235.

[48] Gail Buttorff, "Coordination Failure and the Politics of Tribes: Jordanian Elections under SNTV," *Electoral Studies*, 40 (2015): 54.

[49] SNTV is known to produce larger "seat bonuses" for smaller parties for this reason. See Gary Cox, "Is the Single Nontransferable Vote Superproportional? Evidence from Japan and Taiwan," *American Journal of Political Science*, 40, no. 3 (1996): 740-755.

questions that allow us to test claims made as part of H1; while it does not ask respondents about

their tribal affiliation per se, we can make a reasonable approximation of tribe-affiliated and

ḥaḍar population by comparing Sunni respondents from Kuwaiti governorates noted for a

heavier presence of tribal candidates (Jahra and Ahmadi) with those from other governorates

with a higher portion of *ḥaḍar* Sunni Kuwaitis (the capital, Hawalli, and Mubarak al-Kabeer).[50]

While some Shiʿi Kuwaitis are members of tribes (such as former Member of Parliament Nasser

al-Shammari (2012-2013)), focusing on differences between Sunni Kuwaitis from different areas

allows us to better isolate any difference between tribe-affiliated and *ḥaḍar* Kuwaitis.[51] This

leaves us with 679 respondents whom interviewers determined were Sunni, including 238 from

areas with larger tribal populations and 441 from those with smaller tribal populations.

Second, the Kuwait Politics Database, created and maintained by Michael Herb, provides

information on vote totals and candidate affiliations for elections dating back to Kuwait's

independence in 1961.[52] While merely being a member of a particular tribe is no guarantee that

an individual candidate leverages these ties or runs as a tribe-affiliated ("tribal") candidate, the

tribal affiliation listed for each candidate within the database provides some indication as to

whether a candidate belongs to one of Kuwait's larger or smaller tribal confederations.[53] This

allows us to test whether tribes are overrepresented in parliament (H2) as well as the ability of

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[50] Given that Farwaniyah covers a more mixed area, we drop it from our sample for our main regressions. Including it as a non-tribal area has no effect on our regression outcomes, however (Table A3 in the Appendix). This does not provide us with a perfect comparison of "tribal" and non-tribal respondents, but is a defensible first step pending more fine-grain polling data.

[51] Nasser al-Shammari is, moreover, the only tribe-affiliated Shiʿi candidate to appear in the Kuwait Politics Database for post-1991 elections.

[52] Kuwait Politics Database, http://www.kuwaitpolitics.org.

[53] We recognize the risks of referring to identity markers as if they are equivalent to fixed, bounded groups of people. See Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 7-27.

tribal blocs to regulate the number of viable candidates fielded in different election cycles under

different electoral laws (H3).

Testing the Tribal Vote

Examining Tribal Attitudes Toward Democracy

First, to test whether respondents in tribal areas or organizations tend to view democracy

in transactional terms, we rely on a survey question that asks respondents about the "most

important feature of democracy," choosing from a list of six. We consider respondents who

selected "providing basic items (such as food, housing, and clothing) to every individual" as the

most important feature of democracy as being the closest to expressing this "transactional"

perspective.[54] Next, we test whether respondents from more tribe-heavy governorates are more

likely to consider tribal background an important qualification for high office.[55] We also code

whether respondents were likely to defer to government authority by agreeing that "citizens must

support the government's decisions even if they disagree with them."

We include several control variables to ensure that any distinctions between regions do

not merely reflect the difference in composition between these regions. We measure citizens'

grievances toward the government by constructing a scale of each respondent's answers to

questions about their satisfaction with the government's efforts to fight economic inequality,

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[54] Other options are whether the key feature of democracy is 1) "the opportunity to change the government through elections," 2) a "freedom to criticize the government," 3) success in "narrowing the gap between rich and poor," 4) an "equality of political rights between citizens," or 5) "eliminating financial and administrative corruption."

[55] Respondents ranked the importance of tribal background next to eight other factors. We consider respondents as caring about tribal background if they considered it anything other than the seventh, eighth, or ninth most important factor (only 28 percent of respondents did so). We obtain similar results if we treat responses as a continuous measure or choose a different cut point for dichotomous responses.

provide citizens with jobs, and ensure citizens have access to health care. We normalize

responses to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, such that a higher value of

"grievance" indicates greater dissatisfaction with the Kuwaiti government. We also note whether

respondents had attended university or had at least completed secondary school given the

longstanding association of greater education with increased political participation. We further

consider respondents' overall economic satisfaction – whether they felt that all their needs were

satisfied or at least had enough income to cover costs (compared with those who felt that their

income did not cover their costs). Finally, in addition to controlling for the gender of the

respondent, we note how many associations respondents indicated being a part of, out of

tribal/family, charitable, youth, and trade organizations. In comparing the two sub-groups of

Sunni respondents, we find that they are well-balanced in terms of key control variables. A test

of difference-in-means cannot reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference between

respondents from Ahmadi/Jahra and other regions with respect to each of our key control

variables; therefore, any difference in responses between tribe-heavy and other regions is

unlikely to simply reflect demographic differences between the regions.

	Min.	Max	SD	Ahmadi and Jahra (238)	Hawalli, Capital, Mubarak al-Kabeer (303)	p-value, t-test for significant difference
Completed BA or above	0	1	0.43	0.26	0.24	0.47
Completed secondary ed.	0	1	0.46	0.29	0.33	0.28
Grievance towards government	-1.88	2.85	0.98	-.07	.04	0.19
Associations joined	0	4	1.37	1.73	1.81	0.44
Can save	0	1	0.43	0.24	0.24	0.99
Expenses covered	0	1	0.50	0.58	0.54	0.32
Female	0	1	0.50	0.53	0.50	0.49

Table 1: Distribution of key control variables across different governorates in Kuwait, along with t tests for significance regarding these differences.

We estimate logistic regressions for each of our (binary) outcomes of interest with robust standard errors (HC2). Across all of our initial specifications, we find little support for H1: tribe-affiliated and non-affiliated Kuwaitis appear similar in their attitudes towards democracy, candidate background, and deference to the government as well as self-reported political participation. Figure 2 shows this by comparing the predicted probabilities of an identical Kuwaiti Sunni respondent from tribal and non-tribal areas answering in the affirmative on each of these points, controlling for education, economic status, material grievances, organizational membership, and gender.[56] We observe no statistically significant difference between the two sub-groups on any of these measures (Figure 2).[57]

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[56] Our results are reported in full in Table A2 in the Appendix.
[57] Our results are reported in full in the online data appendix to this article

Kuwait Sunni Respondents
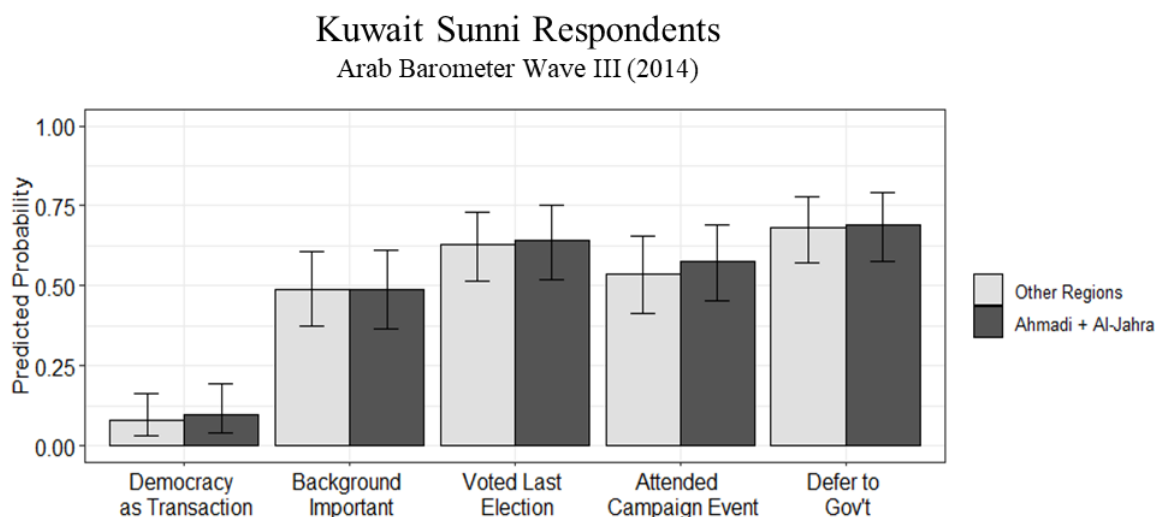### Arab Barometer Wave III (2014)

Figure 2: Predicted probability of responding in the affirmative to each of five questions of political beliefs or values, based on whether the respondent resided in Ahmadi/Jahra or another governorate in Kuwait. Values represent male, secondary-education respondent who reports their expenses as covered, with media levels of self-reported associational life and grievances.

Assessing Changes to Electoral Law and Tribal Representation

In assessing whether changes to district sizes and the number of voters per person have systematically overrepresented tribes in Kuwaiti politics (H2), we find some evidence of the over-representation of tribes in past elections but little evidence of efforts by the government to boost tribal representation over time. The move from twenty-five districts to five did little to diminish overall tribal representation within the National Assembly; additionally, under both electoral rules, large and mid-sized tribes were significantly and consistently overrepresented in parliament relative to smaller tribes. The move to a five-district, SNTV electoral rule in 2012, however, favored smaller tribes (at least through 2016).

First, we test whether there is a growing tribal presence in parliament by assessing whether the number of tribe-affiliated candidates has grown over time. Next, we test the extent to

which electoral changes altered tribes' ability to win votes by comparing the share of victorious tribal candidates to rough estimates of Kuwait's tribe-affiliated citizens as a percentage of the electorate.[58] We do so across three electoral systems since 1991: the twenty-five-district, four-vote system from 1992-2006; the five-district, four-vote system from 2008-2012; and the five-district, SNTV system from 2012-present.

There has been no uniform increase in the number of tribal candidates elected to the National Assembly over time (Figure 3). With the exception of the second election in 2012 (which a significant number of tribal blocs boycotted), "tribal" representation within the Kuwaiti parliament has remained within a very narrow band – between twenty-one and twenty-six seats of the fifty elected, or 42 to 52 percent of elected seats in the Kuwaiti parliament. If the population of tribe-affiliated Kuwaitis has grown more rapidly than other Kuwaiti demographics, then the relatively constant number of seats won by Kuwaiti tribes reflects – if anything – decreasing representation over time.

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[58] Shafeeq Ghabra, "Kuwait: At the Crossroads of Change or Political Stagnation," *Middle East Institute*, May 20, 2014, https://www.mei.edu/publications/kuwait-crossroads-change-or-political-stagnation; Longva, "Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise."
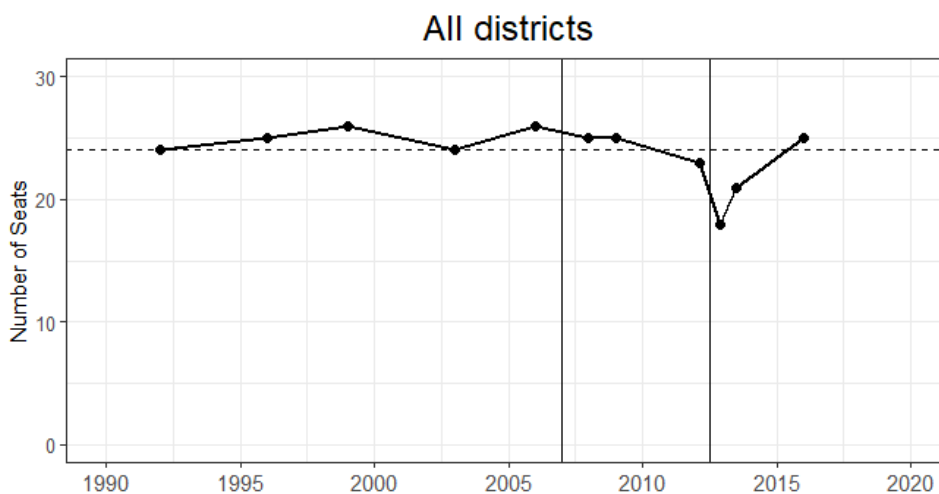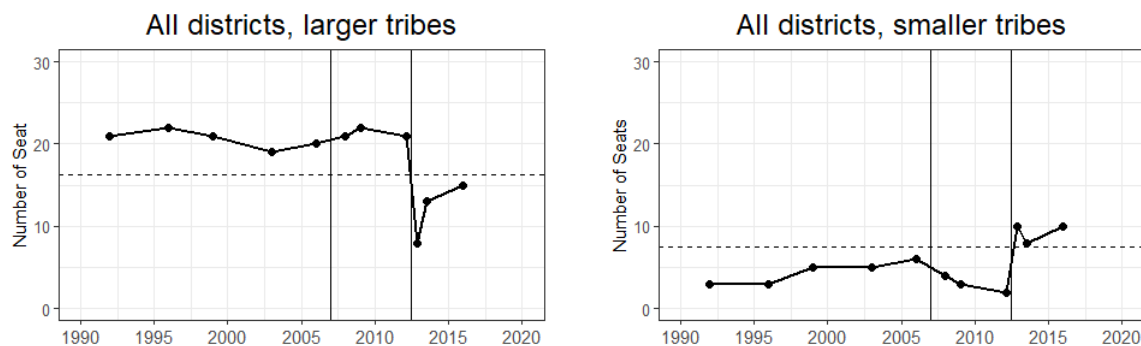
Figure 3: Number of seats won by tribe-affiliated candidates in regular Kuwaiti elections, 1992-2016, compared with an "expected" number of seats (dotted line) based on representing 48% of the Kuwaiti electorate (24).

Statistical comparisons of seats won by tribe-affiliated candidates over time and the data

from *al-Haqiqa* suggest that "tribal representation" within parliament has tended to be slightly

larger than the share of tribal voters within the population. Prior to 2008, an average of around

twenty-five tribe-affiliated members of parliament represented half of the elected seats in

parliament; given that we only have access to demographics data from 2016, the degree of

overrepresentation may be even greater in earlier periods.[59] The 50 percent average across six

elections is in line with the 48 percent of the electorate from the 2016 *al-Haqiqa* data. There was

little change in overall tribal representation in moving from twenty-five districts to five,

however. The average number of seats won after the introduction of SNTV is lower (21),

although the difference from the pre-SNTV, five-district era is not statistically significant due the

limited number of observations (three SNTV elections as of 2019, one without a large-scale

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[59] In other words, if Kuwait's tribe-affiliated population has grown faster over the past few decades, they may have made up considerably less than 48% of the electorate in the 1990s.

boycott).[60]

Figures 4 and 5: Number of seats won by candidates affiliated with larger (Mutayri, ʿAzimi, ʿAnaza, Rushayda, Bani Hajar) and other, smaller tribes, 1992-2016. Dotted lines represent the portion these tribes made up in the Kuwaiti electorate in 2016.

Available data also suggest, however, that the composition of representation tended to favor larger (i.e., largest and mid-sized) tribes prior to the introduction of SNTV (Figure 4). For both periods of transferable votes (twenty-five-district and five-district), these five tribes tend to be overrepresented in parliament relative to their share of the 2016 electorate, while smaller tribal groupings tend to be underrepresented (Figure 5); both differences are significant in difference-in-means tests at the $p < 0.01$ level. With the introduction of SNTV, the situation is (if anything) reversed; smaller tribes are slightly overrepresented, while larger tribes are slightly underrepresented.[61] Neither difference is significant at the $p < 0.10$ level, however. This corresponds with the known effects of SNTV on political parties in other countries – making it difficult for larger parties to coordinate votes behind a limited of viable candidates.

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[60] Our results are unchanged if we drop the second election of 2012, subject to a widespread boycott in protest of changes to the electoral rule.

[61] The largest and mid-sized tribes held 21-22 seats in the National Assembly (42-44%), on average, under the 5-district, 4-vote electoral rule – significantly greater than their 32.5% of the electorate at the $p < 0.01$ level in a difference-in-means test. Smaller tribes an average of 3 seats during this period (6%) despite making up around 15% of the electorate – significantly underrepresented at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Taken together – a relatively static number of tribal MPs, slight over-representation relative to population demographics but a slight under-representation relative to votes – voting data provide little evidence that changes to electoral law have systematically benefited tribal candidates. The slight overrepresentation of tribe-affiliated Kuwaitis results from their domination of electoral competition in Districts IV and V even as citizens of these districts are structurally under-represented within Kuwaiti politics. In 2016, for example, tribe-affiliated Kuwaitis made up around 75 percent of voters in Districts IV and V but took 19 seats (95 percent) in parliament. Results were more proportional in Districts I to III – tribe-affiliated Kuwaitis make up around 16 percent of the electorate, and six seats (20 percent) were won by tribe-affiliated candidates. Yet despite the fact that voters in Districts IV and V made up an estimated 55 percent of the electorate in 2016, they competed for just 40 percent of available seats (20) in the National Assembly.

The Role of Tribal Primaries in Securing a Tribal Advantage

Examining voting data in more detail suggests that tribes have learned to utilize primaries and other informal institutions to coordinate candidate entry and voting, and that the consolidation of twenty-five districts into five districts aided these efforts while the introduction of SNTV undermined the ability of tribes to regulate candidate entry. Furthermore, disaggregation of results suggests that the consolidation of districts and the reduced number of votes disproportionately affected the two largest tribes: the 'Azimi and Mutayri. We focus primarily on Districts IV and V given that tribes' overall representation depends on their overrepresentation in these areas.

To test whether changes in electoral institutions affected tribal campaigns in general, and those of large tribes in particular, we examine trends in the overall number of candidates affiliated with different tribes as well as the effective number of candidates – a measure of the number of truly competitive candidates in each election.[62] The overall number of candidates affiliated with different tribes offers an indication of how well tribes regulate candidate entry – more candidates from the same tribe makes it more difficult for tribes to coordinate votes around tribal names no matter how well-organized they are. We therefore conduct ordinary least-squares (OLS) regressions of the total number of candidates affiliated with each tribe on the electoral rule in place (five-district or SNTV, compared to the baseline results for the 25-district system). We should expect the switch to a five-district system to be associated with fewer candidates affiliated with each tribe, while moving from four votes to an SNTV system should be associated with more candidates-per-tribe (as more marginal candidates believe they have a chance at winning). We include a measure for the passage of time from the introduction of each new electoral rule (i.e., 1992 = 0, 1996 = 1, 1999 = 2…) to test whether tribes field fewer candidates over time. On average, we would expect fewer candidates to enter each successive election as tribes organize to discourage marginal candidates from entering.[63]

We subsequently conduct OLS regressions of the effective number of candidates on the electoral rule as well as the total number of candidates affiliated with each tribe. This provides a measure of how well various tribes are able to coordinate votes behind a smaller number of

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[62] We use the formula proposed by Grigorii Gosolov to calculate the number of "viable" candidates within a given district. Grigorii V. Golosov, "The Effective Number of Parties: A New Approach." *Party Politics*, 16, no. 2 (2010): 171-192.

[63] We also include a fixed-effect indicator variable for each specific tribe, to control for unobserved variation between different tribes.

candidates. We further interact the number of candidates with the electoral rule to test whether

the shifts to five-district and SNTV systems affect the degree of coordination. If the coefficient

on an interaction is negative, this provides evidence of more vote clustering around a smaller set

of candidates under this electoral system (compared with the initial twenty-five-district, four-

vote system).

Given that we lack detailed data on which tribes opted to participate in the boycott of the

second elections of 2012, we drop this year from our analysis rather than model the boycott

directly within regressions. For each set of analyses, we conduct further regressions on three

subsets of the data – focusing on the two largest tribes ('Azimi and Mutayri), on the mid-sized

tribes (Ajman, Rushaydah and 'Anaza), and on remaining, smaller tribes.

	Total # of Candidates			
	All	Largest	Mid-sized	Smaller
Five	-2.03^{***}	-4.83^{***}	-2.80^{***}	-1.00^{***}
	(0.49)	(1.46)	(0.65)	(0.27)
SNTV	1.76^{**}	5.40^{***}	1.83	0.79
	(0.73)	(0.45)	(2.15)	(0.51)
Time pass	-0.48^{**}	-0.80	-1.01^{**}	-0.20
	(0.21)	(0.90)	(0.50)	(0.19)
Constant	8.83^{***}	10.95^{***}	9.89^{***}	2.85^{***}
	(0.38)	(1.97)	(0.53)	(0.36)
Observations	135	20	35	80
R^2	0.77	0.72	0.56	0.44
Note:			$^*p<0.1;$ $^{**}p<0.05;$ $^{***}p<0.01$	

Table 2: OLS regressions of total number of candidates on electoral rule in use, the number of elections since the last change in electoral rule, and dummy variables for each tribe (not shown), with robust standard errors clustered by tribe.

Regarding the total number of candidates (reported in Table 2), we observe that the consolidation into five districts was associated with significantly fewer candidates affiliated with each particular tribe, while the move to an SNTV system was associated with significantly more candidates – in line with what we would expect. Furthermore, there is evidence that this effect is concentrated among the two largest tribes, the Mutayri and the 'Azimi, given that the change in electoral systems is associated with a much larger swing in the average number of candidates for them. Additionally, the shift toward more candidates under SNTV (positive coefficient) is only significantly different than under the twenty-five-district system for these largest tribes. There is also some evidence of tribes "learning" to exclude more marginal candidates over time; the estimated coefficient is negative across all groupings and is significant at the ($p < 0.05$) level for the full sample (though is significant at this level only for mid-sized tribe sub-grouping).

	Ratio of Candidates to EFNC			
	All	Largest	Medium	Smaller
25 district	0.73	0.73	0.44	0.22
	(0.58, 0.87)	(0.72, 0.75)	(0.29, 0.73)	(0.12, 0.42)
5 district	0.52***	0.34***	0.35	0.35
	(0.23, 0.80)	(0.31, 0.37)	(0.00, 0.97)	(0.037, 0.67)
SNTV	0.56	0.59***	0.34	0.26
	(0.41, 0.72)	(0.56, 0.62)	(0.00, 0.87)	(0.00, 0.62)
Observations	135	20	35	80
Note:				*$p<0.1$; **$p<0.05$; ***$p<0.01$

Table 3: Predicted ratio of candidates to effective number of candidates, based on OLS regressions of effective number of candidates on the number of candidates, electoral rule in use, the number of elections since the last change in electoral rule, and the interaction of the number of candidates with each of the other variables. Table notes when ratio differs significantly from ratio under the previous electoral rule. Robust standard errors clustered by tribe, 95% confidence intervals.

Our next set of regressions assess the ratio between the total number of candidates affiliated with a tribe and the effective number of candidates. Table 3 reports these statistics by combining the regression coefficient on "candidates" with interaction terms for different electoral rules, allowing us to assess whether tribe-affiliated votes are grouped more tightly within a given field of candidates under different institutional arrangements.[64] Our regression results for all tribes reflect a significantly higher clustering of votes among a smaller (relative) number of tribe-affiliated candidates after the consolidation of twenty-five districts into five districts, regardless of the number of votes per person.[65] These smaller ratios mean that a given number of total candidates translated into even fewer effective candidates under the five-district and SNTV electoral rules. This suggests that, given a particular number of candidates running, tribes have been reasonably capable of coordinating behind a smaller field of preferred candidates even under SNTV, yet (based on our results in Table 2) have had to contend with significantly more candidates running under SNTV. Focusing on sub-groups of tribes suggests that the largest tribes account for much of this effect, with the 'Azimi and Mutayri witnessing substantially tighter coordination under the five-district, four-vote electoral system; however, this coordination significantly eroded under the SNTV system. Tribes with fewer members exhibited no significant change across this time period in terms of vote coordination behind affiliated candidates. In sum, introduction of SNTV affected the ability of tribes to regulate candidate entry via informal tribal "lists" of preferred candidates, most clearly for the largest tribes in Kuwait.

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[64] We report quantities of interest and standard errors with categorical conditioning variables following the recommendations in Thomas Brambor, William Roberts Clark, and Matt Golder. "Understanding Interaction Models: Improving Empirical Analyses," *Political Analysis* (2006): 75.

[65] Table A4 in the appendix indicates a significantly higher ratio under the 25-district system compared with the baseline 5-district system, but no significant change following the move to the SNTV system.

Figure 7 shows the average number of candidates affiliated with Kuwait's nine largest tribes – as expected, most of the larger tribes fielded several more candidates (and dispersed votes across a broader number of effective candidates) in the 2013 and 2016 elections.
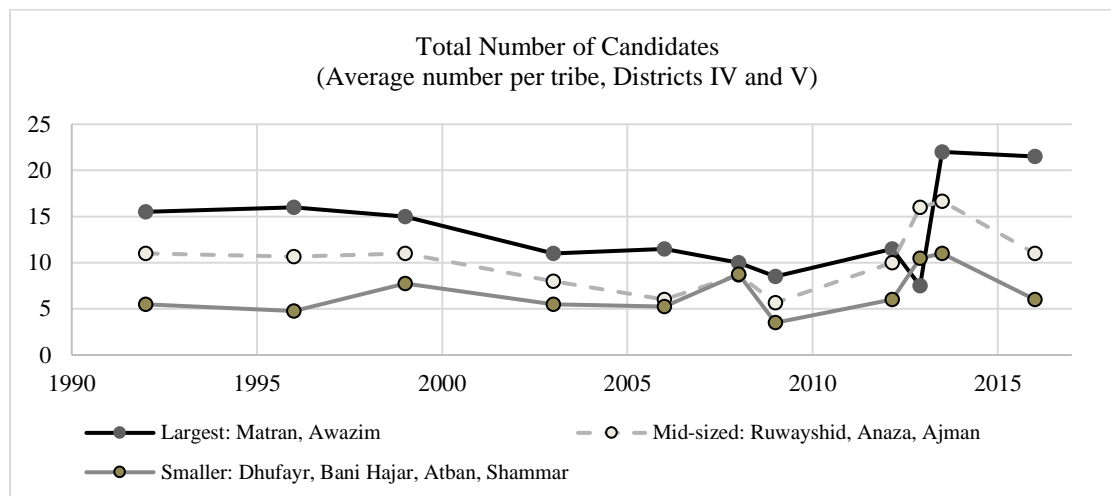
Figure 7: Average number of candidates per tribe in each National Assembly Election for Kuwait nine largest tribes in terms of members, grouped according to relative size of the tribe. Source: Kuwait Politics Database.

This has translated into considerably fewer seats being held by the largest tribes in Districts IV and V – seats which smaller tribes (including the smallest tribes) have tended to win. Before 2012, candidates from tribes such as the 'Adwani, Dawsari, and Ghanem rarely won more than a single seat between them; since 2012, they have tended to win at least three seats between them. By contrast, before SNTV was instituted, the Mutayri and ʿAzimi tended to hold over eight seats between them; in the two most recent elections, however, only four candidates affiliated with these tribes have secured seats in the National Assembly (on average). While SNTV has had many effects on political dynamics in Kuwait's elections, its main effect on tribal representation has therefore been to alter the composition of tribes with affiliated members in parliament – not to alter the overall portion of MPs with tribal affiliations. Smaller tribes have

still been able to obtain representation larger than their "natural" constituency of tribal members would suggest – even the largest tribes have been able to retain representation in districts where they represent a smaller portion of the electorate (such as the ʿAzimi in District I, or the ʿAnaza in District II).
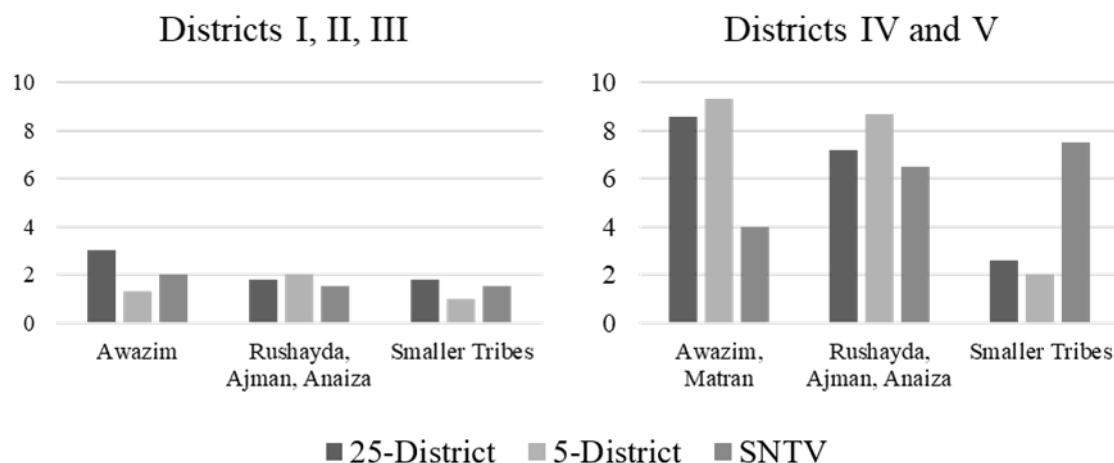
Figure 8 and 9: Seats won by candidates affiliated with various tribes under different electoral systems. Source: Kuwait Politics Database.

Recognizing the disadvantages they faced, the largest tribes have adopted new strategies like listing candidates by clan or family name rather than tribe, thereby encouraging sub-divisions of the tribe to coordinate around specific candidates.[66] Interviewees suggested that larger tribes still struggled to reach a consensus about which candidates (and how many) to back in contesting elections.[67] However, results of the 2016 election represented something of a recovery for most large tribes; with the exception of the ʿAzimi, most larger tribes gained or at least maintained the National Assembly representatives under their tribe's name (compared with 2013).

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[66] Ibid.
[67] Interviews with Kuwaiti political scientists at Kuwait University, 3 May 2018.

Beyond Tribal Identity?

Given that the concerns about the implications of tribal identities on the quality of democracy in

Kuwait, and policymakers citing the strength of tribal affinities as an excuse for limiting the

power of elections elsewhere in the GCC, we note that the organizing advantages of tribal

membership do not prevent tribe-affiliated candidates from building electoral coalitions within

their kinship groups.[68] The career of Musallam al-Barrak, Kuwait's best-known opposition

figure, provides an instructive example of a new generation of tribal political leaders emerging in

Kuwait that have sought to build broader political coalitions atop foundations of ascriptive

markers of identity to build broader political coalitions. Barrak's career is also an indication of

how the Kuwaiti government, at the behest of the ruling family, has intervened to disrupt this

coalition-building.

Al-Barrak garnered initial support through the legacy of his father, Muhammad Hamad

al-Barrak, who served as an MP between 1967 and 1981 as a reliably pro-regime voice.

Musallam al-Barrak entered in parliament in 1996 and was re-elected in every parliament

through the first 2012 election.[69] Though initially popular among his own Mutayri tribe, al-

Barrak grew outspoken against the use of tribal primaries and joined forces with opposition

leader and former parliamentary speaker Ahmed al-Saadoun to create the Popular Action Bloc in

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[68] Qatari officials, for example, have cited the challenges of assuring "fair" tribal representation as a reason for delaying long-promised Advisory Council elections. Kristin Smith Diwan, "Qatar's Domestic Agenda and the Gulf Crisis," *Lawfare*, February 25, 2018, https://www.lawfareblog.com/qatars-domestic-agenda-and-gulf-crisis.

[69] Habib Toumi, "Who is Musallam Al Barrak?" *Gulf News*, October 30, 2012, https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/who-is-musallam-al-barrak-1.1095928.

2001 – the first instance of a major tribal leader participating in the founding of an ideological

group. The bloc advocates for enhancing the role of legislative oversight in governmental

decision-making, particularly in protecting the constitution and monitoring government

spending.[70]

      The strength of al-Barrak's electoral coalition is reflected in the MP's high vote shares in

a series of elections, wherein he garnered the highest share (and number) of votes in what would

eventually merge into District IV in five of the eight elections he contested, including all of those

held after redistricting in 2006 (Figure 10). This type of advocacy represents a marked departure

from the traditional tribal "service member," like al-Barrak's father, focused solely on securing

economic procurements for his own constituents rather than advocating for major policy

changes. Notably, al-Barrak's presence in an ideological bloc has also made him no less popular

among his own tribe, further demonstrating that members of tribes do not have a solely

transactional understanding of electoral participation.

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[70] "Kitlat al-ʿaml al-shʿabi tuhadid thalath qadaya lil-taʿawun mʿa al-hukuma," *al-Qabas*, July 9, 2006, https://alqabas.com/233320/.

Figure 10: Vote shares of Musallam al-Barrak and all other candidates for District IV (pre-2006 districts later merged into district IV are show together). Source: Kuwait Politics Database, authors' calculations.

In 2013, Kristin Diwan noted al-Barrak's unique standing in the post-liberation Kuwaiti opposition landscape as being neither an Islamist nor a liberal, the two categories into which non-tribal opposition are often placed in Kuwait; Kuwaiti political scientist Shafeeq Ghabra describes him as a combination trade unionist, politician, and national leader who aims at opening up the country's elite politics.[71] Al-Barrak presented himself as a populist, particularly as an advocate for public sector employees, opposing government plans for privatization and megaprojects thought to benefit the ruling family and its elite business partners.[72]

The end (for now) of al-Barrak's political career came not through electoral defeat but through being barred from political participation by the Kuwaiti government. In 2013, he was sentenced to five years of hard labor for a 2012 speech in which (amid national protests

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[71] Kristin Smith Diwan, "The Politics of Transgression in Kuwait," *Foreign Policy*, April 19, 2013, https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/19/the-politics-of-transgression-in-kuwait/; Ghabra, "Kuwait: At the Crossroads of Change or Political Stagnation."

[72] "Al-Barraak: al-khaskhasa bai'a al-balad lil-mulaak al-judud wa Rula: la mukhalifa dusturiya wa la takhsis lil-naft," *Al-Anba'*, May 7, 2010, https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/parliament/111174/07-05-2010-البراك-الخصخصة-بيع-البلد-للملاك-الجدد-ورولا-مخالفة-دستورية-ولا-تخصيص-للنفط/

regarding changes to the electoral law) he challenged the amir directly: "We will not let you, your highness, take this country into autocracy" – a refrain that was often repeated by the opposition.[73] Al-Barrak left prison in April 2017 after serving a two-year sentence, only to be sentenced again, in November 2017, to nine years in prison for his participation in storming the parliament in November 2011 during protests that demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah.

Since his second sentencing, Al-Barrak has been residing outside Kuwait, but remains widely admired as a leader of the Kuwaiti opposition and a new type of tribal opposition leader. As one interviewee and current Islamist MP explained, support for tribal leaders, particularly from those tribes considered more oppositional (Mutayri and ʿAjman), is today "less based on genealogy than ideology" – a marked change from the older generation of tribal leaders, and a potential challenge for to the continued effective use of tribal primaries.[74] However, given the willingness of the Kuwaiti officials to repress efforts at building ideological coalitions – whether through formal restrictions on parties or piecemeal arrests and expulsions – it is uncertain whether any would-be opposition leader can follow in al-Barrak's footsteps.

Conclusions: Assessing Tribal Influence in Kuwait

Given the political and social influence of Kuwait's tribal population, it is unsurprising that tribes retain electoral influence, even if the electoral share of the largest tribes has fallen in the last few parliamentary polls.[75] Kuwait's tribes have managed to coalesce into small yet robust

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[73] "Khitaāb 'kafaā 'abathaān' aladhi sujina bisababihi al-Barrak," Youtube Video, 40:24, October 15, 2012.

[74] Interview with Muslim Brotherhood politician, Kuwait City, 3 October 2016.

[75] Etheridge, "Kuwaiti Tribes Turn Parliament to Own Advantage."

political blocs – building blocks for greater political action that rival Kuwait's fledgling ideological parties. This electoral coordination supplements the longstanding ability of tribal connections to assist Kuwaiti citizens in sidestepping the frustrations of an overly complex bureaucracy.[76] As we suggest in this paper, citizens with these connections are able to leverage the organizational structures and source of identity that tribes provide to coordinate voting around particular candidates and mobilize communities to make it to the polls. Furthermore, this mobilization may prove the starting point for broader political coalition-building in the future.

Data presented here point to promising avenues for future research. Coordination between tribes is often noted but poorly documented; district-level information on the tribal affiliation of candidates combined with qualitative fieldwork might assess where and how efforts at vote coordination arose, and how this coordination is being reestablished under the constraints of the SNTV system. Likewise, data analyzed here suggest a considerable amount of variation within tribes as to how effectively they are able to coordinate votes behind particular tribal candidates, or when these candidates work to expand their electoral coalitions beyond within-tribe vote-getting. Furthermore, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the implications of shifting tribal representation for coalition-building and policymaking within the National Assembly, pairing the shifts in Kuwaiti electoral laws with changes in parliamentary voting patterns (also available from the Herb's Kuwait Politics Database) may also prove fruitful.

Together, these results suggest a need to understand tribal political mobilization as a strategic adaptation by Kuwaiti communities to structural challenges posed by a political system

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[76] Ibid.

that often militates against effective vote coordination, rather than a flaw introduced by a failure

of tribes in Kuwait to appreciate the true value of democracy. Future election returns will allow

researchers to better determine whether larger tribes exhibit the same structural difficulties as

Jordanian tribes in establishing candidate coordination under SNTV, or if smaller sub-divisions

of tribal identities can form the basis for large tribes to reconfigure themselves as voting blocs.

A perceived rise in tribes' political capital, even if not substantiated by electoral returns,

has been met in the past with concern that a "tribal mentality" in parliament would "destroy the

institutions of civil society as tribal MPs [are seen to] lack any platform of national

development."[77] The skepticism and, in some cases, fear about tribes in Kuwait may reflect their

apparent ability to use strong informal institutions like *dīwāniyyāt* and primaries capable of

altering the political status quo for the benefit of other, less organized political interest groups.

As we have shown, using available data from the Arab Barometer, there does not appear to be a

clear difference in the views on democracy between tribe-affiliated and *ḥaḍar* Kuwaitis. It would

therefore be a mistake for Kuwait's liberals and independents to continue to decry such tribal

institutions as somehow undemocratic, or to continue to deride them as part of a uniquely

"tribal" mentality that seeks only to enter office to do favors for one's friends and family.

Coordination of any kind appears threatened by the current electoral incentives of Kuwait's

SNTV law, which encourage the same kind of personal service-seeking that some *ḥaḍar*

observers criticize among Kuwait's tribes.[78]

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[77] Gwenn Okruhlik, "The Identity Politics of Kuwait's Election," *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2012, http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/08/the-identity-politics-of-kuwaits-election/.

[78] Daniel L. Tavana, "The Evolution of the Kuwaiti 'Opposition': Electoral Politics after the Arab Spring," Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Issue Brief, July 8, 2018, https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/files/c4ee2f5d/bi-brief-080718-cme-carnegie-kuwait1.pdf.

Whatever the rent-seeking goals of Kuwaiti parliamentarians at present, which appear to be important for both tribal and non-tribal candidates, the country's tribes might be an effective ally in a broader campaign to permit meaningful political parties in the country, particularly as a new generation of tribal leaders emerges. The so-called tribal advantage at the ballot box, which we have shown holds largely for tribes being over-represented in districts where citizens overall are under-represented (IV and V), is not likely to disappear through crackdowns on tribal coordination or attempts at electoral reform.[79] The implementation of the SNTV system hinders large tribes but not tribes overall, while also hindering the ability of other organized groups to carry out basic party functions such as brand-development, platform construction, and candidate selection.

These results suggest that instead of efforts to shield parliament from "tribalism" – an argument given for the lack of an elected parliament in Qatar as well[80] – permitting and building non-identity-based forms of political organization, chiefly political parties, can dilute the paramount importance of tribal ties. The experience of Musallam al-Barrak is instructive in this manner: though he initially appealed to members of his own Mutayri tribe, he today has become associated with the pro-reform agenda of the Popular Action Bloc. Likewise, his efforts to build a broad political coalition within Kuwaiti politics were hindered not by the limitations of ascriptive identities, but by the political restrictions imposed by the authoritarian side of Kuwait's hybrid regime. Kuwait does not suffer from problems of institutional design so much as restrictions on open and democratic political contestation.

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[79] Laila Ali, "Tensions Over Tribal Elections Raise Concerns in Kuwait," *Gulf News*, April 14, 2008, https://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/tensions-over-tribal-elections-raise-concerns-in-kuwait-1.97853.
[80] Kristin Smith Diwan, "Between Popular Representation and the State: The Politics of Municipal Council Elections in the GCC," The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington Policy Paper 8 (2015), 6.