

Perceptions of democracy within the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract. Support for democracy in the Middle East and North Africa constitutes an important element of democratization and the consolidation of transitions from authoritarian rule. Recent research has indicated the sharp decline of popular support for democracy because of extreme instability across the region. In this study, an empirical examination of the most recent data from the Arab Barometer (seventh wave) across 12 countries provides a comprehensive outlook on citizens' views on democracy in the region. Overall, Arab citizens across all countries included in the research believe that democracy is a better system compared with its alternatives despite its problems. More importantly, more than half the sample in each of the 12 countries agreed that democracy is associated with "weak economic performance", is "indecisive", and fails to maintain "order". Notwithstanding the sizable proportion of the population suggesting such negative connotations to democracy, Arab citizens generally still believe that democracy is a desirable "core value" to any society. Evidently, in countries that have witnessed large-scale instability, support for democracy seems to dwindle more compared with countries that have held free and fair elections and are characterized with lively party politics. This paper contributes to the literature on

Received:
March, 2024
1st Revision:
October, 2024
Accepted:
March, 2025

DOI:
10.14254/2071-
8330.2025/18-1/4

democratization by showing how long-term instability and mediocre economic growth lead to diminished support for democracy in developing countries.

Keywords: democracy, democratization support, Arab barometer, Middle East and North Africa.

JEL Classification: H11, O43, P51, O11

1. INTRODUCTION

Support for democracy in the Arab World is uneven (Kilavuz & Sumaktoyo, 2020). The examination of the recent survey data from the region indicates the stark variability in citizens' advocacy within the political system (Kostanecki, 2022; Spierings, 2020). On the one hand, countries that witnessed large-scale instabilities like Iraq, Libya, and Lebanon have shown rises in popularly held negative perceptions of democracy such as viewing the system as indecisive or failing to maintain law and order (Cammett et al., 2020). On the other hand, countries that did not experience massive Arab Spring movements like Kuwait enjoy more public support for democracy as a political system (Marzouki, 2022; Williamson, 2021). Notwithstanding the variation in democratic support, evidence still suggests that most citizens in the Arab World consider democracy to be a better alternative compared to the other available political systems (Abduljaber, 2018a; Ourya & Raïq, 2022).

The purpose of the present analysis is to investigate the levels of support for democracy among ordinary Arab citizens. More specifically, this analysis focuses on the extent to which Arab citizens view democracy as a viable political system compared with the other alternatives like autocratic or authoritarian regimes. To fulfill this goal, a comprehensive examination of the most recent data from the seventh wave of the Arab Barometer was performed. The data was collected between 2021 and 2022 in 12 countries, namely Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, and Kuwait. This research aimed to ascertain the extent to which Arab citizens support democracy. Achieving this objective required the analysis of a variety of items within the data used for this research.

Results suggest that Arab citizens still support democracy as the most viable political system compared with others. While the current levels of support today seem to be lower compared to pre-Arb Spring levels (Abduljaber, 2017; 2018b), democracy is still considered by the clear majority in every country as the most preferred system of governance. Despite the overwhelming support, in every country considered, a sizable minority still hold the view that democracy is not the best system suitable for governing Middle Eastern and North African countries. More importantly, large proportions in each of the 12 countries agreed that democracy is "an indecisive" system that fails to maintain "order and stability." Similarly, large proportions in each country considered democracy to be associated with "weak economic performance." Demographic factors like gender and type of residence (rural vs. urban) seem to have little effect on citizens' views of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa. In countries suffering from political instability after experiencing civil wars, revolutions or invasions, levels of democracy support were lower compared to their neighbors that did not witness such large-scale critical events.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Survey research on Arab citizens' political systems preferences has long noted the presence of anti-democratic sentiments among segments of the population in each country (Robbins, 2022). For instance, Battaloglu and Farasin (2017) demonstrated one fifth to a third of Arab citizens in each country do not believe democracy is the most viable system suitable to governing the Middle East or North Africa (Jamal & Tessler, 2008a). Similarly, Tessler and Robbins (2014) demonstrated weaker support for democracy

among Arab citizens who resided in countries that resulted in civil wars killing and displacing millions of people. Arab sentiments toward democracy appears to be mixed (Abduljaber & Onder, 2024), however its overall decline has been noted since the beginning of the Arab Spring (Onder, 2023).

Democracy support across the globe is somewhat high. In one cross-national survey of 34 countries, the Pew Research Center concluded that 78% of respondents agree that Democracy is a good system of governance (Wike et al., 2017). By the same token, more than 83% of participants in a similar survey indicated that dictatorships are bad forms of government (Wike et al., 2024). In the most recent wave of the Arab Barometer, Democracy support levels were like global averages depending on the item researchers use. For instance, about 70% of all participants agree that Democracy is still the preferred form of government despite its drawbacks.

2.1. Explaining the Declining Support for Democracy in the Arab World

The rising power of authoritarian governments across Arab countries in the aftermath of the Arab Spring has led to the realization of many ordinary citizens that democracy may not be suitable for their countries. Authoritarian rulers exploited the deteriorating economic conditions experienced after revolutions and civil instability questioning the power of democracy in bringing economic wellbeing, as well as political stability (Mazaheri & Monroe, 2018). On the one hand, governments began to depict democracy as a slowing mechanism for economic progress and development. On the other hand, rulers spewed speeches prioritizing the economy over political rights and freedom and the need for investing in economic policies rather than being preoccupied with political races. Many citizens have incorporated some of such signals into their perceptions and shifted their position from being a favorite for democratic systems to becoming lukewarm, and at times antagonistic to the liberal system.

Citizens in Arab countries have attached high economic expectations to democratic systems (Diwan, 2013; Masoud, 2021). Many believe that once transitions occur from authoritarian governments into democratic regimes, economic wellbeing will be improved quickly (Al-Ississ & Diwan, 2016; Mazaheri & Monroe, 2018; Onder, 2021). When transitions failed in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, many ordinary citizens were disappointed with the performance on democratically elected governments. Further, instabilities in the region were linked to democratic transitions, adding negative connotations to democracy. Therefore, democracy in the eyes of many meant the utter failure of their countries to guarantee economic growth or even security (Onder, 2019, 2022).

2.2. Democracy support in the Middle East

Levels of democracy support in Arab countries around the turn of the twenty-first century were at their highest since data collection efforts began to appear in mass surveys on the region (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023). For instance, Arabs citizens agree with statements like they most preferred political system ranges between 80 and 96 percent (Teti et al., 2019). Citizens in the Arab World embraced one of the highest levels of democracy support around the world just before the outbreak of the Egyptian uprising in 2011 that triggered the Arab Spring (Badr, 2021).

Prior to the Arab Spring, initial analyses of the Arab Barometer data led to the belief that ordinary citizens of the Middle East were amongst the most fervid supporters of democracy around the world (Jamal & Tessler, 2008). Democracy support was at its highest levels in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine., Kuwait, and Morocco (Jamal & Tessler, 2008a). Arab citizens overwhelmingly believed that democracy was the most suitable political system in their countries (Battaloglu & Farasin, 2017).

After witnessing a series of civil wars, coups, bloody conflicts, and deteriorating economic conditions throughout the Arab Spring years, Arab citizens exhibited lower support for democracy. Arab Barometer

Waves Four data demonstrated significant decreases in support for the same statement that enjoyed very high agreement levels in the first wave, democracy is the preferred political system despite its faults or drawbacks. Teti et al. (2019) reported decreases of 10 to 20 percent in agreement levels with the above statement within a span of 10 years. By the same token, Robbins (2015) reported further decreases in democracy support over time, and especially after the year of 2020 in more Arabic countries (Robbins, 2022). For instance, Morocco witnessed more than 25% decline in agreement levels with the statement that democracy is the most preferred system.

Table 1 demonstrates the decline of democracy support in the Middle East across all countries featured in some of the seminal studies in the literature of democracy perceptions and all Arab Barometer waves between 2006 and 2022. Noticeably, Arab citizens in the region exhibit lower support for democracy compared to two decades ago. For example, Jordanians support for democracy decreased from 90% to 74% over the lifetime of the project. Similar or higher drops occurred across much of the region during the same period.

Table 1

Demonstration of the democracy support decline in the Middle East and North Africa

	Tessler and Gao (2005) Data Collection Year: 2002	Jamal and Tessler (2008b) Data Collection Year: 2006	Teti et al. (2019) Data Collection Year: 2016	Arab Barometer Second Wave Data Collection Year: 2011	Arab Barometer Third Wave Data Collection Year: 2014	Arab Barometer Seventh Wave Data Collection Year: 2022
Algeria	0.88	0.83	-	0.675	0.7	0.7377
Egypt	0.93	-	0.613	0.715	0.705	0.6576
Iraq	-	-	-	0.82	0.71	0.6821
Jordan	0.9	0.86	0.898	0.735	0.745	0.7654
Kuwait	-	0.88	-	-	-	0.8434
Lebanon	-	-	-	0.805	0.835	0.7978
Libya	-	-	-	-	0.69	0.6869
Mauritania	-	-	-	-	-	0.7075
Morocco	0.9	0.92	0.803	-	-	0.5752
Palestine	-	0.83	-	0.795	0.78	0.7172
Sudan	-	-	-	0.735	0.725	0.6729
Tunisia	-	-	0.777	0.71	0.7	0.7288
Yemen	-	-	-	0.735	0.68	-

Over a decade after the Arab Spring, studies of democracy support in the Middle East and North Africa noted a significant decrease in citizens' support for democracy. One of the explanations is the rising disillusionment of people in the region with the way their lives were affected by politics after the transitions. Citizens lost their jobs, experienced distress at all levels, and sometimes tragically lost a family member because of the unfolding events of transitions (Lynch, 2021). Further, weak economic performance and political instability were common repercussions of the Arab Spring, leading millions of individuals to equate democracy with some of the negative symptoms experienced (Hassanzadeh, 2024; Mirak-Weissbach, 2022). Thus, many people have lost hope in democracy in becoming the conduit of change and became sympathizers with the status quo that appeared to be a viable alternative, bringing security and stability to the nation (Yossef et al., 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

The research design guiding this examination is the quantitative strategy. The Arab Barometer constitutes the source of the data in this paper. Survey data from the latest available wave, the seventh, is utilized in this research. Between 2021 and 2022, more than 25,000 people across twelve Arab countries were interviewed face to face and via phone to complete a long questionnaire asking them about their views on society, the economy, and political systems. Each subject was interviewed once, and no households were followed representing a classic case of cross-sectional research. Thus, this research is a quantitative survey-based cross-sectional investigation.

3.1. Sampling

The Arab Barometer utilizes nationally representative sampling strategies to generate large random samples to be used in the research. Multi-cluster and multi-stage sampling techniques are followed to guarantee better representation. The Arab Barometer teams meet with local coordinators in each country to tweak the sampling strategy to reach remote populations such as those residing in remote areas. Each sample is composed of at least 1000 respondents. For details on the sampling methodologies and characteristics of the Arab Barometer, accessing the following link helps in understanding the details of the sampling frame and strategy:

https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/AB7_Technical_Report.pdf.

Table 2 presents a description of the sample in the Seventh Wave of the Arab Barometer. All samples utilized stratified area probability samples, a type of multistage/cluster design. Sampling frames originated oftentimes from census data in each of the countries included in the wave. All interviews were completed using a computer, and computer-assisted personal interviews.

Table 2

Detailed description of the sample

	Algeria	Egypt	Iraq	Jordan	Kuwait	Lebanon	Libya	Mauritania	Morocco	Palestine	Sudan	Tunisia
Target population	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above	Citizens aged 18 and above
Sample design	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample	Stratified area probability sample
Sampling frame	General census of housing and population in 2008	Census in 2017 by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization	Population estimates provided by the Iraqi Ministry of Planning	2015 Population and Housing Census	2011 Census by the Central Statistical Bureau	Public Housing and Population Census in 2011	Libyan Center for Documentation and Statistics 2012	National Office of Statistics - Census in 2013	Population and Housing Census in 2014	General Census of housing and population in 2007	2018 census of the Sudanese Central Bureau of Statistics	2014 Census by National Institute of Statistics

Strata	Regions and areas	Governorate and areas	Governorate and areas	Governorates and areas	n/a	Governorates and sect	Governorates and area	Governorates and area	Governorates and areas	Governorates and areas	States and areas	Governorate and areas
Number of strata	7	43	36	30	6	32	38	27	23	42	36	46
Number of regions (governates)	4	22	18	12	n/a	8	22	15	12	16+1 (Jerusalem split)	18	24
Number of primary samplings units (PSUs)	230	239	164	299	72	240	299	250	298	120	297	300
PSU selection	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size	Probability proportional to size
Household selection	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point	Systematic skip interval of households with random starting point
Respondent selection	Kish grid	Kish grid	Last birthday	Kish grid	First to the door	Kish grid	Kish grid	Kish grid	Kish grid	Kish grid	Kish grid	Kish grid
Mode of data collection	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer-Assisted Interviews (CAPI); Pen-and-Paper Interviews	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)	Computer Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI)
Number of observations	2,162	2,044	2,460	2,399	1,282	2,399	2,505	2,000	2,404	1,800	2,353	2,400
Response Rate	25.2%	53%	77%	52%	25.3%	37%	44%	53%	38%	52%	74%	17%

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave Technical Report

3.2. Data collection and variables

All data in the Arab Barometer was collected face to face or by phone. Each interview was conducted in Arabic or the preferred language of the interviewee. The interview lasted for more than an hour and up to two hours given the extensive nature of the survey. The interviewers received a great deal of training in conducting interviews, and all interviews were completed using laptops or tablets where the questions were already embedded into the system.

The main variable in this research is democracy support. While there is no direct question on the questionnaire asking citizens how much they support democracy or similar language to that, there were several items involving respondents' views on democracy. A total of five different Likert items were used

in this research. The first item asked respondents about their support of democracy as a core value for society. The second item inquired about whether participants believe that there is a link between democracy and weak economic performance. The third item investigated whether citizens believe that democracy is indecisive and full of problems compared with other systems. The fourth item examined the extent to which people consider democracy failing in maintaining order and stability. More importantly, the fifth item surveyed participants' overall ratings of democracy compared with alternatives despite its inherent problems.

3.3. Data analysis

To analyze the information, descriptive statistical methods were used to summarize trends in the data. First, for the five items considered, frequency distributions demonstrating agreement and disagreement levels with each of the statements for the overall sample in the survey were displayed. Second, the same frequency distributions were presented continent on the countries in the analysis. Third, the overall distributions for each item were also tabulated based on gender and residence type to examine any potential patterns.

In addition to descriptive analysis, inferential statistical analysis in the form of hypothesis testing constituted the significance testing phase of the research. The researchers performed an independent samples t test to investigate whether the means' difference in democracy support prior to the Arab Spring and today is real or appear to be explained by chance. To perform the t test, a review of the literature was conducted to collect democracy support scores in the early 2000s across Arab countries. A table with democracy support means that the same item "democracy" is the most "appropriate" or "preferred" system of government is available or could be recovered from studies that were constructed by the researchers. Note that all the data came from the 1st wave and the Seventh Wave of the Arab Barometer for the test (2006 and 2022). Also, the t test was performed on countries with democracy support scores available in both waves. Microsoft Excel data analysis tool was used to perform the test. The significance of the results was judged based on the alpha level of 0.05 observed level of significance.

4. RESULTS

Figure 1 shows a bar graph demonstrating a country's means for the question asking respondents about whether democracy is a core value of a society or not. Note that the means of countries are similar ranging from 2 to 2.5 indicating a slight agreement level with the statement. Overall, Arab citizens believe that democracy constitutes a core value to a society. Tunisia appears to have a higher agreement level compared to other countries. The mean exceeded 2.5, noting to the higher value citizens place on democracy as a core component of the social fabric in the country.

4.1. Democracy support in the Middle East

Prior to the Arab Spring, initial analyses of the Arab Barometer data led to the belief that ordinary citizens of the Middle East were amongst the most fervid supporters of democracy around the world (Jamal & Tessler, 2008a). Democracy support was at its highest levels in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine., Kuwait, and Morocco (Jamal & Tessler, 2008a). Arab citizens overwhelmingly believed that democracy was the most suitable political system in their countries (Battaloglu & Farasin, 2017).

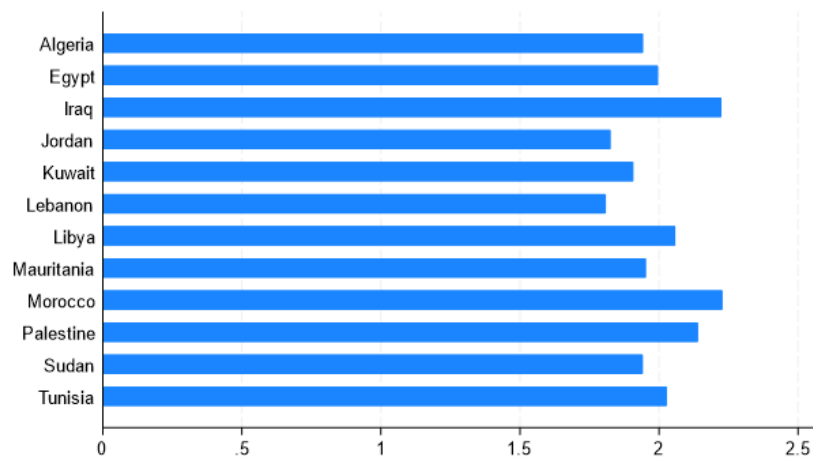


Figure 1. Mean scores for countries considering the concept of democracy as part of the societal core value

I am interested in how you think about the core values underlying any society. Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion:

1. For people like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have
2. Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable
3. Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

Figure 2 highlights the means on whether democracy has a negative effect on economic performance across countries. Note that higher numbers on the x-axis correspond to disagreeing with the statement suggesting a negative relationship between democracy and economic performance. Overall, Arab citizens have means ranging between two and three indicating a general disagreement level with the fact that democracy and weak economic performance are related. Tunisia and Iraq have the lowest means suggesting that citizens in both nations are divided with significant proportions condoning the statement suggesting a negative association between democracy and economic performance.

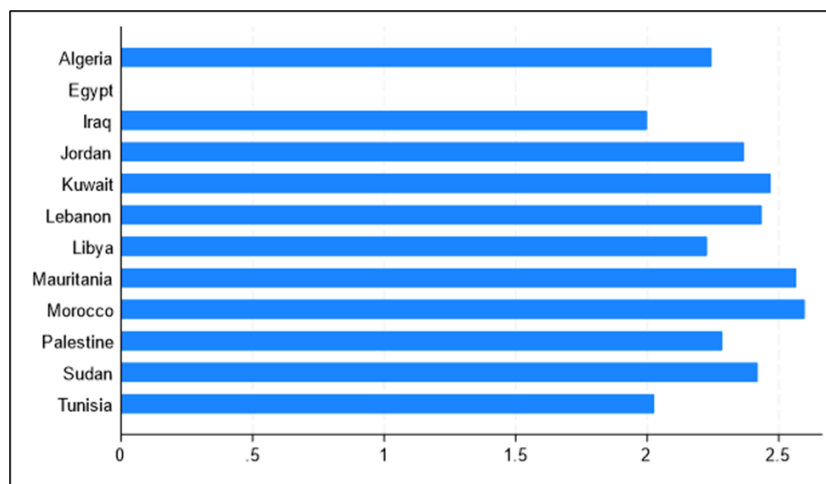


Figure 2. Mean scores for countries on democracies' economic performance evaluation

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Under a democratic system, the country's economic performance is weak.

1. I strongly agree; 2. I agree; 3. I disagree; 4. I strongly disagree.
1. For people like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have
2. Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable

3. Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government.

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

Figure 3 represents the means of Arab citizens on whether democracy is indecisive and problematic or not across countries. Note that higher scores on the x-axis correspond to further disagreement levels with the statement. Arab countries possess means ranging between two and three indicating slight disagreement with the notion that democracy is indecisive. Tunisia, Libya, and Iraq appear to have the lowest means indicating to higher proportions of populations across these countries who hold negative views of democracy such as considering the system indecisive.

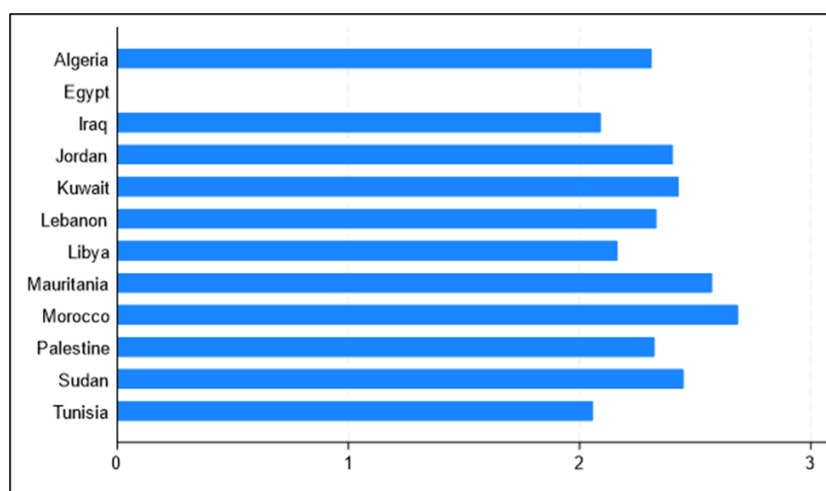


Figure 3. Mean scores for countries considering negative aspects of democracies part 1/2

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems.

1. I strongly agree; 2. I agree; 3. I disagree; 4. I strongly disagree.

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

Figure 4 demonstrates the means of Arab citizens on whether democracy is an ineffective system in maintaining stability and order. Higher scores correspond to further disagreement levels with the statement on the x-axis. All observed means range between two and three suggesting that Arab citizens slightly believe that democracy is an effective system for law-and-order purposes. By the same token, Tunisia, Libya, Lebanon, and Iraq all possessed the smallest means in comparison with other countries. Such an observation alludes to the fact that instability leads citizens to believe that democracy is an ineffective system at maintaining order in societies.

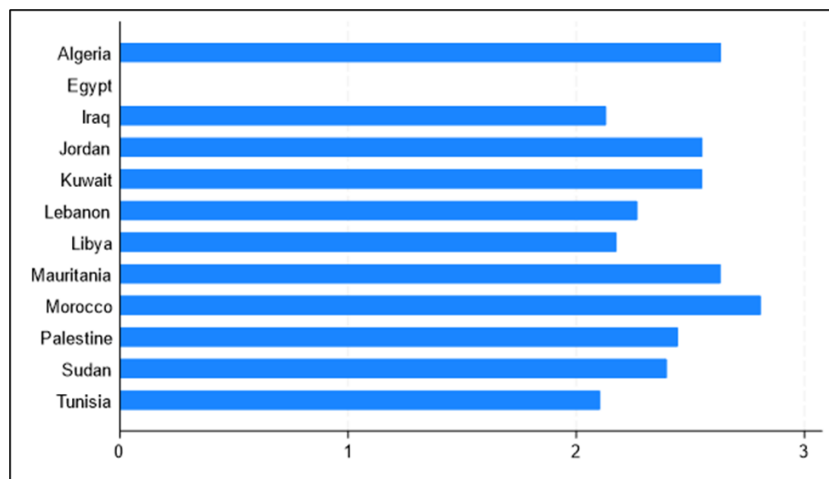


Figure 4. Mean scores for countries considering negative aspects of democracies part 2/2

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Democratic systems are not effective at maintaining order and stability.

1. I strongly agree; 2. I agree; 3. I disagree; 4. I strongly disagree.

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

Figure 5 shows countries' means with respect to whether citizens agreed or disagreed with the statement that democracy is a better system despite its problems. Higher numbers on the x-axis correspond to further disagreement. Note that most means are around two indicating that the majority of respondents agree that democracy is better than any other political system regardless of the system's problems. Morocco, Palestine, Iraq, and Libya all exhibited higher than two means indicating that many citizens in these countries disagree with the statement suggesting that democracy is better than other systems.

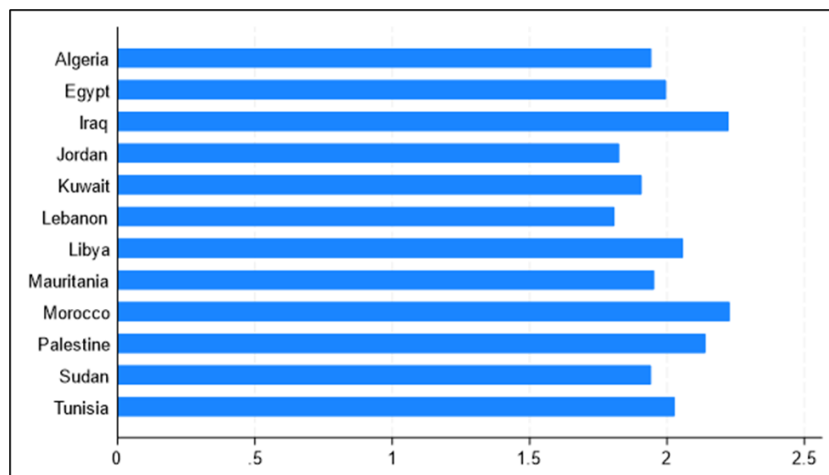


Figure 5. Mean scores for countries considering positive aspects of democracies

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Democratic systems may have problems, yet they are better than other systems.

1. I strongly agree; 2. I agree; 3. I disagree; 4. I strongly disagree.

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

4.2. Democracy as a core value to society

Ordinary Arab citizens favor democracy as a core value governing their societies. According to Table 3, about 54% of all 24921 respondents chose one of three varying statements about the underlying core values of society identified with "democracy is always preferable to other systems." In comparison, 23% of individuals responded to the same question stating that the type of government does not matter as a core value in society. The remaining 18% indicated that non-democratic governments are sometimes preferable to other systems in regulating social relations and political affairs among citizens. The rest of the sample refused to answer or replied with "I do not know" to the question. One may conclude that one fifth of ordinary Arab citizens believe in some value attached to authoritarian systems. Nevertheless, more than half of respondents agreed that democracy is always preferable to other political systems in governing people and society.

Table 3 demonstrates the breakdown of democracy support as a core value continent on gender. Note that the percentage differences in support across the three statements are about 5%. For instance, 52% of males, compared with 47% of females, indicated that democracy is always a preferable system to any other arrangement. The small percentage difference suggests little variability in democracy support as a core value to society based on gender. Furthermore, Table 3 indicates support for democracy as a core value based on residence type. Note that two thirds of the survey participants came from urban areas while one third resided in rural terrains. Note that each statement percentages reflect similar demographic breakdowns where two thirds of those identifying with the statement are urban residents while one third of them are rural. This indicates no significant effects of residence on support for democracy as a core value in the entire sample of the Arab Barometer.

Table 3 also presents democracy support as a core value across all countries included in the Arab Barometer. Jordan appears to have the highest support for democracy as a core value to society with 66% of respondents in the Kingdom indicating their support for the statement "democracy is always preferable." On the other hand, Libya has the lowest support for democracy as a core value with a 38% support rate for the same statement. Palestine and Tunisia also reflected above average support for democracy with percentages at 60% and 64% respectively. Morocco appeared to have a lower support rate with only 46% of its respondents agreeing that democracy is always preferable to other systems. In Algeria, Iraq, Libya, and Lebanon, more than 20% of respondents identified with the statement that "non-democracies" have value to society and are preferable to democracy.

Table 3

Depiction of the Democracy Perception as a Core Value to Society

General frequency distribution with respect to item options			
I am interested in how you think about the core values underlying any society. Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion:	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
For people like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have	5,758	23.11%	23.11%
Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable	4,724	18.96%	42.06%
Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government	13,443	53.94%	96.00%
Don't know	835	3.35%	99.35%
Refused to answer	161	0.65%	100.00%
Total	24,921	100.00%	
Frequency distribution with respect to gender			

I am interested in how you think about the core values underlying any society. Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion:	Male	Female	Total			
For people like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have	2,574 47.83%	3,004 52.17%	5,758 100.00%			
Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable	2,472 52.33%	2,252 47.67%	4,724 100.00%			
Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable	7,013 52.17%	6,430 47.83%	13,443 100.00%			
Don't know	295 35.33%	540 64.67%	835 100.00%			
Refused to answer	98 60.87%	63 39.13%	161 100.00%			
Total	12,632 50,69%	12,289 49.31%	24,921 100.00%			
Frequency distribution with respect to location						
I am interested in how you think about the core values underlying any society. Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion:	Urban	Rural	Camp	Total		
For people like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have	3,591 62.37%	2,217 36.94%	40 0.69%	5,758 100.00%		
Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable	3,164 66.98%	1,506 31.88%	54 1.14%	4,724 100.00%		
Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable	8,585 63.86%	4,625 34.40%	233 1.73%	13,443 100.00%		
Don't know	503 60.24%	313 37.49%	19 2.28%	835 100.00%		
Refused to answer	116 72.05%	43 27.71%	2 1.24%	161 100.00%		
Total	15,959 64.04%	8,614 34.57%	348 1.40%	24,921 100.00%		
Frequency distribution with respect to countries						
Country	I am interested in how you think about the core values underlying any society. Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion:					Total
	For people like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have	Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable	Under some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable	Don't Know	Refused to Answer	
Algeria	452 20,91%	481 22.25%	1,182 54.57%	35 1.62%	12 0.56%	2,162 100.00%
Egypt	590 28,86%	214 10.47%	1,044 51.08%	161 7.88%	35 1.71%	2,044 100.00%
Iraq	535 21.75%	596 24.23%	1,306 53.09%	19 0.77%	4 0.16%	2,460 100.00%
Jordan	481 20.05%	201 8.38%	1,588 66.19%	103 4.29%	26 1.08%	2,399 100.00%
Lebanon	587 24.47%	506 21.09%	1,283 53.48%	23 0.96%	0 0.00%	2,399 100.00%
Libya	716 28.58%	694 27.70%	959 38.28%	127 5.07%	9 0.36%	2,505 100.00%

Mauritania	619 30.95%	300 15.00%	1,057 53.35%	9 0.45%	5 0.25%	2,000 100.00%
Morocco	705 29.33%	463 19.26%	1,119 46.55%	72 3.00%	45 1.87%	2,404 100.00%
Palestine	316 17.59%	306 17.04%	1,080 60.13%	85 4.73%	9 0.50%	1,796 100.00%
Sudan	533 22.65%	481 20.44%	1,279 54.36%	54 2.29%	6 0.25%	2,353 100.00%
Tunisia	224 9.34%	482 20.09%	1,536 64.03%	147 6.13%	10 0.42%	2,399 100.00%
Total	5,758 23,11%	4,724 18.96%	13,443 53.94%	835 3.35%	161 0.65%	24,921 100.00%

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

4.3. Arab Citizens' Views on Democracy

Arab citizens largely believe that democracy is associated with weak economic performance. According to Table 4, approximately 56% of the entire sample who reported an agreement level with the statement that "under a democratic system, the country's economic performance is weak" agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. On the other hand, about 39% of citizens disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same statement. Variability in agreement levels exists across countries.

Table 4 also shows the variability across countries with respect to the rates of agreement with the statement asking whether democracy is associated with weak performance. Iraq and Tunisia occupy the highest rates of agreement exceeding 65% (both agree and strongly agree) indicating that democracy has a negative effect on the economy. Kuwait, Mauritania, and Morocco have the least agreement levels on the same statement below 50% (when combining agree and strongly agree categories). Nonetheless, a significant proportion of each included country in the analysis hold negative views about democracy for its detrimental effects on economic performance.

On another front, Arab citizens view democracy as a problematic political system. According to Table 5, approximately 56% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that democracy is "indecisive and full of problems." On the other hand, only 39% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same statement. Overall, more than half of Arab citizens who participated in the latest wave of the Arab Barometer (Seventh Wave) harbor negative perceptions concerning democracy. The intensity of agreement with the above statement differed across countries.

Table 5 also demonstrates the percentages of agreement levels with the statement "democracy is indecisive and full of problems" across countries. Iraq and Tunisia possessed the highest rates of agreement with the statement exceeding 65% (when one combines agree and strongly agree). On the contrary, Mauritania and Morocco have the least agreement levels with the statement with rates below 50%. Overall, a large proportion of Arab citizens in every participating country in the Arab Barometer hold negative views about democracy characterizing the system as indecisive and full of problems.

Table 4

Depiction of the association of democracy and economic performance perceptions

General frequency distribution with respect to item options							
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Under a democratic system, the country’s economic performance is weak.				Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage	
Strongly Agree				2,609	21.92%	21.92%	
Agree				4,062	34.13%	56.05%	
Disagree				3,094	26.00%	82.05%	
Strongly Disagree				1,583	13.30%	95.35%	
Don’t Know				497	4.18%	99.52%	
Refused to Answer				57	0.48%	100.00%	
Total				11,902	100.00%		
Frequency Distribution with Respect to Countries							
Country	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Under a democratic system, the country’s economic performance is weak.						Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don’t Know	Refused to Answer	
Algeria	176 16.91%	481 46.21%	282 27.09%	80 7.68%	20 1.92%	2 0.19%	1,041 100.00%
Egypt	446 38.42%	407 35.06%	160 13.78%	142 12.23%	5 0.43%	1 0.09%	1,161 100.00%
Iraq	313 25.06%	366 29.30%	246 19.70%	230 18.41%	87 6.97%	7 0.56%	1,249 100.00%
Jordan	39 6.23%	273 43.61%	251 40.10%	35 5.59%	25 3.99%	3 0.48%	626 100.00%
Lebanon	269 22.76%	341 28.85%	341 28.85%	216 18.27%	14 1.18%	1 0.08%	1,182 100.00%
Libya	319 26.21%	401 32.95%	294 24.16%	151 12.41%	46 3.78%	6 0.49%	1,217 100.00%
Mauritania	167 16.39%	240 23.55%	448 43.96%	136 13.35%	23 2.26%	5 0.49%	1,019 100.00%
Morocco	134 11.38%	363 30.84%	370 31.44%	208 17.67%	95 8.07%	7 0.59%	1,177 100.00%
Palestine	112 12.96%	437 50.58%	209 24.19%	61 7.06%	45 5.21%	0 0.00%	864 100.00%
Sudan	242 20.61%	330 28.11%	316 26.92%	193 16.44%	71 6.05%	22 1.87%	1,174 100.00%
Tunisia	393 32.89%	423 35.49%	177 14.85%	131 10.99%	66 5.54%	3 0.25%	1,192 100.00%
Total	2,609 21.92%	4,062 34.13%	3,094 26.00%	1,583 13.30%	497 4.18%	57 0.48%	11,902 100.00%

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

Table 5

Perceptions on the trouble with democracy

General frequency distribution with respect to item options							
Democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems.				Frequency		Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Strongly Agree				2,376		19.97%	19.97%
Agree				4,214		35.42%	55.40%
Disagree				3,135		26.35%	81.75%
Strongly Disagree				1,569		13.19%	94.94%
Don't Know				540		4.54%	99.48%
Refused to Answer				62		0.52%	100.00%
Total				11,896		100.00%	
Frequency Distribution with Respect to Countries							
Country	Democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems.						Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	Refused to Answer	
Algeria	181 17.39%	413 39.67%	326 31.32%	86 8.26%	32 3.07%	3 0.29%	1,041 100.00%
Egypt	371 31.96%	461 39.71%	165 14.21%	155 13.35%	9 0.78%	0 0.00%	1,161 100.00%
Iraq	233 18.65%	435 34.83%	257 20.58%	217 17.37%	98 7.85%	9 0.72%	1,249 100.00%
Jordan	47 7.51%	283 45.21%	237 37.86%	34 5.43%	22 3.51%	3 0.48%	626 100.00%
Lebanon	296 25.04%	392 33.16%	292 24.70%	196 16.58%	5 0.42%	1 0.08%	1,182 100.00%
Libya	332 27.28%	391 32.13%	335 27.53%	106 8.71%	51 4.19%	2 0.16%	1,217 100.00%
Mauritania	146 14.33%	266 26.10%	431 42.30%	142 13.94%	25 2.45%	9 0.88%	1,019 100.00%
Morocco	103 8.75%	369 31.35%	343 29.14%	246 20.90%	104 8.84%	12 1.02%	1,177 100.00%
Palestine	99 11.51%	414 48.14%	234 27.21%	65 7.56%	48 5.58%	0 0.00%	860 100.00%
Sudan	222 18.91%	347 29.56%	306 26.06%	206 17.55%	73 6.22%	20 1.70%	1,174 100.00%
Tunisia	346 29.08%	443 37.23%	209 17.56%	116 9.75%	73 6.13%	3 0.25%	1,190 100.00%
Total	2,376 19.97%	4,214 35.42%	3,135 26.35%	1,569 13.19%	540 4.54%	62 0.52%	11,895 100.00%

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

With respect to whether democracy maintains "order and stability", more than half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement suggesting the failure of democracy in achieving stability in

societies. On the other hand, according to Table 6, about 43% of all participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the characterization that democracy fails to maintain order and stability. Evident in Table 6, a large proportion of Arab citizens hold negative perceptions toward democracy. The intensity of the negativity, however, varies across countries.

Arab citizens vary with respect to agreement levels on whether democracy is a capable system for maintaining order or not. Table also 6 presents percentage agreement levels with the same statement on whether democracy is good for maintaining stability or not across countries. Iraqis and Tunisians appear to believe that democracy does not suit order and stability as a political system with high agreement rates exceeding 65% with the statement in question. To the contrary, Moroccans and Mauritians appear to believe that democracy is suitable for maintaining order and stability with disagreement rates exceeding 60% with the same statement. Regardless of the country considered, a large proportion of citizens in each Arab nation-states believe that democracy is not able to keep the peace in society.

Table 6

Perceptions on questioning the effectiveness of democracy

General frequency distribution with respect to item options							
Democratic systems are not effective at maintaining order and stability.				Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage	
Strongly Agree				2,222	18.68%	18.68%	
Agree				3,933	33.06%	51.73%	
Disagree				3,380	28.41%	80.14%	
Strongly Disagree				1,803	15.15%	95.29%	
Don't Know				502	4.22%	99.51%	
Refused to Answer				58	0.49%	100.00%	
Total				11,898	100.00%		
Frequency Distribution with Respect to Countries							
Country	Democratic systems are not effective at maintaining order and stability.						Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	Refused to Answer	
Algeria	107 10.28%	358 34.39%	360 34.58%	185 17.77%	25 2.40%	6 0.58%	1,041 100%
Egypt	351 30.23%	454 39.10%	194 16.71%	156 13.44%	3 0.26%	3 0.26%	1,161 100%
Iraq	204 16.33%	373 29.86%	297 23.78%	270 21.62%	97 7.77%	8 0.64%	1,249 100%
Jordan	37 5.91%	235 37.54%	290 46.33%	42 6.71%	18 2.88%	4 0.64%	626 100%
Lebanon	306 25.89%	391 33.08%	327 27.66%	150 12.69%	7 0.59%	1 0.08%	1,182 100%
Libya	324 26.62%	402 33.03%	323 26.54%	116 9.53%	50 4.11%	2 0.16%	1,217 100%
Mauritania	146 14.34%	223 21.91%	454 44.60%	159 15.62%	25 2.46%	11 1.08%	1,018 100%
Morocco	96 8.16%	310 26.34%	351 29.82%	326 27.70%	88 7.48%	6 0.51%	1,177 100%

Palestine	90 10.45%	365 42.39%	265 30.78%	89 10.34%	50 5.81%	2 0.23%	861 100%
Sudan	253 21.55%	340 28.96%	295 25.13%	206 17.55%	67 5.71%	13 1.11%	1,174 100%
Tunisia	308 25.84%	482 40.44%	224 18.79%	104 8.72%	72 6.04%	2 0.17%	1,192 100%
Total	2,222 18.68%	3,933 33.06%	3,380 28.41%	1,803 15.15%	502 4.22%	58 0.49%	11,898 100%

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

Despite the negative characterizations many Arab citizens ascribe to democracy, once they are asked whether it is "a better system" compared to others, a clear majority agree with such a statement. According to Table 7, about 71% of Arab citizens believe democracy is the best system compared to others despite its problems. On the other side of the spectrum, about 23% of respondents disagree suggesting that democracy is not a better system compared to other political regimes. The disagreement levels vary across countries.

Most countries in the Arab World that are included in the seventh wave of the Arab Barometer reflect a similar pattern with a slight majority approving of democracy as a better system compared to others despite its faults. Table 7 also demonstrates that the percentages of those who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement were between 60 and 85% in all countries except Morocco. Lebanon and Kuwait had the highest approval rates of democracy exceeding 80%. Despite the noticeable support for democracy, a sizable minority in each country still indicated that democracy is not a better system compared to others.

Table 7

Depiction of Perceptions Whether Democracy is Working or not

General frequency distribution with respect to item options							
Democratic systems may have problems, yet they are better than other systems.				Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage	
Strongly Agree				3,843	29.82%	29.82%	
Agree				5,304	41.16%	70.98%	
Disagree				1,978	15.35%	86.33%	
Strongly Disagree				1,019	7.91%	94.23%	
Don't Know				648	5.03%	99.26%	
Refused to Answer				95	0.74%	100.00%	
Total				11,896	100.00%		
Frequency distribution with respect to countries							
Country	Democratic systems may have problems, yet they are better than other systems.						Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know	Refused to Answer	
Algeria	360 34.58%	408 39.19%	163 15.66%	77 7.40%	24 2.31%	9 0.86%	1,041 100.00%
Egypt	157 15.91%	492 49.85%	95 9.63%	35 3.55%	199 20.16%	9 0.91%	987 100.00%
Iraq	302 26.01%	490 42.20%	167 14.38%	196 16.88%	6 0.52%	0 0.00%	1,161 100.00%
Jordan	462 36.99%	494 39.55%	123 9.85%	75 6.00%	89 7.13%	6 0.48%	1,249 100.00%

Kuwait	146 23.32%	382 61.02%	75 11.98%	7 1.12%	11 1.76%	5 0.80%	626 100.00%
Lebanon	527 44.59%	416 35.19%	169 14.30%	64 5.41%	5 0.42%	1 0.08%	1,182 100.00%
Libya	361 29.66%	475 39.03%	213 17.50%	118 9.70%	45 3.70%	5 0.41%	1,217 100.00%
Mauritania	380 37.29%	341 33.46%	214 21.00%	58 5.69%	16 1.57%	10 0.98%	1,019 100.00%
Morocco	247 20.99%	430 36.53%	270 22.94%	118 10.03%	97 8.24%	15 1.27%	1,177 100.00%
Palestine	135 15.64%	484 56.08%	148 17.15%	47 5.45%	48 5.56%	1 0.12%	863 100.00%
Sudan	452 38.50%	338 28.79%	174 14.82%	124 10.56%	56 4.77%	30 2.56%	1,174 100.00%
Tunisia	314 26.36%	554 46.52%	167 14.02%	100 8.40%	52 4.37%	4 0.34%	1,191 100.00%
Total	3,843 29.82%	5,304 41.16%	1,978 15.35%	1,019 7.91%	648 5.03%	95 0.74%	12,887 100.00%

Source: Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

4.4. Significance testing

Table 8 presents democracy support levels in the five Arab countries (i.e., Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Palestine) included in the first and seventh waves of the Arab Barometer. Descriptive evidence shows that levels of democracy support diminished in all five countries between 2006 (first wave) and 2022 (seventh wave). To test the statistical significance of the decline for democracy support, the researchers performed an independent samples t-test. Table 9 demonstrates the results of the test. First, the means difference across the aggregate average for the five countries is about 15 percent. Democracy support decreased from 86% to 72% in the countries considered. The t-test results support the conclusion that such a difference is real and significant. The t-test value was 2.9 with a p-value of less than 0.05, signifying statistical significance.

Table 8

Democracy Support Levels

Countries	First Wave (2006)	Seventh Wave (2022)
Algeria	0.83	0.73
Jordan	0.86	0.76
Kuwait	0.88	0.84
Morocco	0.92	0.57
Palestine	0.83	0.71

Source: Arab Barometer First Wave and Arab Barometer Seventh Wave

Table 9

T-Test Results (Two-Sample Assuming Unequal Variances)

	Democracy Perception (Variable 1) (First Wave)	Democracy Perception (Variable 2) (Seventh Wave)
Mean	0.8640	0.7277
Variance	0.0014	0.0095
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
t-Stat	2.9044	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.0168	
t-Critical one-tail	2.0150	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.0336	
t-Critical two-tail	2.5705	

Source: Authors

Because of the diminished sample size, a Wilcoxon or Mann-Whitney U-test was carried out to confirm the statistical significance observed in the t-test. Table 10 shows that the results are significant at the 0.05 level. In other words, levels of democracy support decreased significantly between 2006 and 2022 in the Arab World.

Table 10

Two Sample Wilcoxon Rank-sum (Mann-Whitney) Test

Variable	Observations Number	Rank Sum	Expected
First Wave	5	38	27.5
Seventh Wave	5	17	27.5
Combined	10	55	55
Unadjusted Variance	22.92		
Adjustment for Ties	-0.14		
Adjusted Variance	22.78		
H ₀	Var2(var1=First Wave) = Var2(var1=Seventh Wave)		
z	2.20		
Prob > z	0.0278		

Source: Authors

5. CONCLUSION

Democracy support is a crucial element for the system to be popular and, more importantly, withstand autocratic shocks or transitions into authoritarianism. Past research demonstrated that if citizens do not support democracy *en masse* in a country, regression into authoritarianism is more probable. More importantly, for democracy to last and be consolidated in a country, citizens should exhibit acceptance and engagement with the system. The Middle East and North Africa has been a region of interest for political scientists given the area's longstanding authoritarianism rule since Arab counties gained independence earlier in the twentieth century.

This paper demonstrated that while democracy is still popular among citizens of Arab countries, a significant proportion of the population in each country still view the system as a problematic regime favoring more Authoritarian rule. Relatedly, the number of people who exhibit negative views on democracy has steadily risen in the Middle East and North Africa in the last decade. In countries where civil strife caused critical societal changes like mass migration, large scale internal displacement, and bloody civil wars,

more people appear to be antagonistic to democracy. Arab citizens associate democracy with solid positive economic performance. Once the fruits have not grown on the trees in the eyes of citizens after transitioning in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, democracy support dwindled.

This research demonstrated the variability in democracy support across Arab countries. Iraq and Libya appear to enjoy the least support compared with Jordan, Kuwait, and Lebanon. One of the interesting conclusions from the analysis is that countries witnessing active party politics and free and fair elections periodically appear to harbor more positive views of democracy. When researching democracy support in the Middle East and North Africa, scholars need to pay specific attention to the measures, methods, and operationalization used in quantifying democracy support. Using different measures could generate varying results.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

No funding was received for this study.

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