

Research paper

Perceived Suitability of Democracy in Jordan

What are the strongest factors affecting the popular perception of the suitability of democracy in Jordan?

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a fundamental concept in most studies on politics and governance, at a national and international level, and it has increasingly become a focus of research within the context of the Middle East. In this region, varying political dynamics and systems shape citizen's trust in state institutions. This paper seeks to answer the question: What are the strongest factors affecting a person's opinion on the suitability of democracy for Jordan? This question gains importance in the face of Jordan's unique political landscape, where the monarchy's influence intersects with local and international pressures for democratization. It is important to note that the Arab Spring protests in Jordan demanded a government reform, not necessarily a regime change¹. Additionally, while the latest amendments to its constitution between 2011 and 2016 distributed power among various public servants and institutions, the king still had executive power². By understanding the factors that encourage or discourage a desire for a full democracy in Jordanian citizens, policymakers and researchers can better gauge public sentiment and identify pathways to more effective governance and representation.

There is a significant gap in empirical literature examining how individual characteristics, social values, and economic conditions influence people's perception of how suitable democracy is specifically in Jordan. Most existing studies focus on general trends in political opinions across the Arab world, often overlooking the unique factors that may impact individual countries. This study's findings, based on the most recent wave of the Arab Barometer survey (Wave VII, conducted from September 2023 to July 2024), will therefore contribute to a more localized understanding of how people perceive the suitability of democracy in Jordan. The data collected includes a combination of

¹ Nagaoka, Shinsuke et al., "THE 5TH INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON ISLAM, CIVILIZATION, AND SCIENCE: ISLAM AS A BASIS FOR CIVILIZATIONAL THOUGHT AND DEVELOPMENT", 459.

² Bani Salameh, M.T. and Ali Ananzah, A., "Constitutional Reforms in Jordan: A Critical Analysis. Digest of Middle East Studies", 148.

questions focused on individuals' perception of the suitability of democracy (referred to as the PSD index for this paper's purposes) as the dependent variable and an amalgamation of various questions regarding people's trust in various current government branches and state institutions as the independent variable. These questions allow for analyzing how social trust and perceived political efficacy relate to Jordanian public opinion on democracy.

This paper will proceed as follows: first, I will review the literature on democracy and state-civilian trust in the Jordanian context, emphasizing theoretical frameworks for understanding how different factors shape public political opinions. Next, I will explain the research methodology and the statistical techniques used to analyze correlations between the survey's dependent and independent variables. I will then present findings from this analysis, highlighting the most significant relationships and discussing their implications for Jordan's political development. Finally, I will conclude by summarizing my findings and discussing possible causes for these results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The way people in Jordan perceive democracy is influenced by complex social, economic, and institutional factors. Scholars emphasize that public confidence in institutions directly influences whether citizens view democracy as suitable for their country. Haddadin³ discusses how Jordan's centralized governance structure and lack of participatory mechanisms foster a disconnect between the government and the public. Citizens' trust remains low as they perceive limited transparency and meaningful inclusion in decision processes, while the government attributes public frustration to a civil lack of engagement⁴. This disconnect has fueled criticism and disillusionment, with citizens still facing unmet needs in infrastructure and employment, highlighting a gap between government intentions and public expectations. Decentralization efforts were introduced in 2015 to address this gap, aiming to give citizens a stronger voice in local decision-making. However, the absence of civic spaces for dialogue, along with insufficient resources for local councils, has restricted the success of these initiatives, leading to continued skepticism toward governance processes.

³ "Jordan's Quest for Decentralization", P. 5

⁴ Haddadin, "Jordan's Quest for Decentralization", P. 6-7

Moreover, since the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, All-Allan highlights how trust dynamics between citizens and the Jordanian government were tested, showing that crisis management and government transparency can significantly impact public confidence and, consequently, political engagement⁵. This aligns with broader findings that public opinions are often more positive when citizens believe their input is valued and that government decisions reflect public interests. In Jordan, economic challenges, including high youth unemployment⁶ and perceived corruption, further complicate political trust and engagement, as citizens may feel disconnected⁷ from a political system that does not adequately address their concerns.

Additionally, tribal affiliations have a great influence on certain groups' trust in the current governing parts and limit the role of other political parties. Tribalism is deeply rooted in Jordanian society and impacts citizens' political behavior, often guiding voting preferences⁸ and electoral strategies. Studies indicate that tribal alliances create a stronghold over political processes, as they are seen as vital to social cohesion and political representation. Alazzam argues that while the Jordanian state has initiated political reforms, the tribal loyalty system continues to dominate parliamentary elections⁹, often surpassing political parties in influence. Furthermore, these tribal affiliations sometimes hinder democratization, as citizens are more likely to support tribal representatives over ideologically driven political parties.

Political parties in Jordan have faced challenges in establishing a robust presence. Historically, the Jordanian government has oscillated between liberalization efforts and restrictions on political parties, particularly in the aftermath of the 1989 political opening¹⁰. Despite the re-legalization of political parties, they remain relatively weak due to authoritarian tendencies and societal fears surrounding party affiliation. Jihad Al-Majali notes that political parties struggle to gain traction, partly due to limited public trust and the legacy of tribal structures that influence voters' decisions. This tribal dominance complicates the development of a democratic culture, as it often prioritizes tribal loyalty over national political ideologies¹¹. In historical structures loyalty to tribe supersedes

⁵ All-Allan, "The crisis of trust between the citizen and the government in light of Corona Virus pandemic crisis", P. 7

⁶ Haddadin, "Jordan's Quest for Decentralization", P. 6

⁷ Haddadin, "Jordan's Quest for Decentralization", P. 56

⁸ Al-Majali, Ismail, and Adnan, "Political Parties, Tribalism, and Democratic Practice in Jordan", P. 498.

⁹ Alazzam, "Political participation in Jordan: the impact of party and tribal loyalties since 1989", P. 140.

¹⁰ Alazzam, "Political participation in Jordan: the impact of party and tribal loyalties since 1989", P. 226.

¹¹ Al-Majali, Ismail, and Adnan, "Political Parties, Tribalism, and Democratic Practice in Jordan", P. 497.

class-based identity, fostering a collective mindset and social cohesion that influences how individuals engage in public and political spheres. Such affiliations often create a sense of solidarity and trust, albeit one that may limit broader, cross-sectional political engagement by prioritizing tribal loyalty over individual opinions on public systems.

Particularly among youth, there are unique social dynamics offering a contrasting perspective on democracy. A study on Jordanian youth highlights the transformative role of social media, it has emerged as a platform for political expression and activism, countering traditional disengagement caused by low trust in political institutions. While it provides an accessible channel for participation their impact on the overall PSD index remains limited in a society where traditional loyalties and institutional inefficiencies dominate¹².

Together, these insights reveal that trust in government, socio-economic conditions, and entrenched social structures shape Jordanians' views of democracy. Existing literature identifies the critical role of institutional performance and societal cohesion in fostering democratic attitudes but often examines these factors in isolation. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how trust in government interacts with socio-economic realities and cultural dynamics to influence the PSD index in Jordan. Integrating these dimensions contributes to a deeper understanding of the trust-democracy relationship in a context marked by persistent challenges and emerging opportunities.

DATA AND METHODS

This study aims to investigate the strongest factors influencing how suitable people perceive democracy in Jordan by testing hypotheses related to government trust indicators. Using quantitative data from the Arab Barometer Wave VII (September 2023 - July 2024), this section outlines the hypotheses, operational definitions of variables, and details about the data collection process.

¹²Alodat, Al-Qora'n, and Abu Hamoud, "Social Media Platforms and Political Participation: A Study of Jordanian Youth Engagement", P. 1.

Hypotheses

H₀: There is no relationship between high levels of Government Trust and perception of the Suitability of Democracy (PSD).

H₁: There is a significant relationship between high levels of Government Trust and perception of the Suitability of Democracy (PSD).

Independent Variables

The independent variables in this study, selected based on prior literature and the survey structure, include demographic and socioeconomic indicators. Each question encompasses multiple other questions, specifying different institutions under the government mandate. These are derived from the Arab Barometer survey questions:

- Q201A: Institutions can be trusted (Council of Ministers, Courts and legal system, Parliament, Prime Minister/Head of Government)
- Q201B: Level of trust per institution (Armed forces/army, Police)

Dependent Variable

Suitability of Democracy, the dependent variable in this study, is expressed in the following question, also a part of the questionnaire:

- Q512: Suitability of democracy for Jordan

By operationalizing suitability of democracy as a rank from 1 to 10, this study will be able to capture both formal and informal modes of engagement, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of political activity in Jordan.

Control variable

- Q1001: Age

After controlling for factors such as gender and previous voting behavior, there was no significant change in the coefficients. However, when controlling for age, there was a difference in the strength of the relationship between the dependent and independent variables.

Data Description and Wrangling

The data analyzed in this study was collected through the Arab Barometer Wave VII survey, which spans 12 countries in the MENA region, including Jordan. The survey uses a multi-stage, stratified random sampling method to ensure representation across different regions, age groups, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Conducted between September 2023 and July 2024, the survey gathered data through structured, face-to-face interviews, providing robust insights into public opinion across a range of topics. The Arab Barometer's emphasis on standardized questions across waves enables comparability over time and ensures that the findings accurately reflect current public sentiment in Jordan.

To extract only the data that is useful for this specific study, I first filtered the dataset to create a new one including only those observations where the answer to the question of what country the respondent was from was Jordan (COUNTRY==8). I proceeded to select the columns of only the questions that were relevant to this paper, these were labeled the same as mentioned in the Data and Methods section. Some observations had value 98 or 99, indicating that the respondent answered "I don't know" or refused to answer. These observations were also filtered out for practical reasons. However, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that attitudes of those excluded are not randomly distributed across the population¹³ and there is in fact a deeper reason for these two answers that might also need to be studied. Finally, to create an average of the people's trust in government branches, I generated an extra column that took all the independent variables listed earlier and created a single average value per observation. The final dataset contained 2,024 observations with 24 variables.

I created four sub-datasets from this dataset, which included only Jordanian answers to separate the different age groups. Since the minimum age was 18 and the maximum was 92, I divided the dataset by filtering each sub-dataset to include only a range of 18 years, for a total of four datasets.

¹³ Teti et al. "Beyond elections: perceptions of democracy in four Arab countries". P. 4

While the younger groups contained more observations than the older ones, I still considered it necessary to separate them based on age rather than on quantiles.

Analysis Plan

This research employs a chi-square test to identify the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, specifically targeting the direction and strength of associations. For this, I categorized both the levels of trust and suitability of democracy as low, medium, and high, to be able to create a contingency table leading to an easier visualization of the process of obtaining the chi-square value. After using R to calculate the test, the results were the following:

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      LowD  MediumD  HighD
LowT      80      151    438
MediumT   149      360    622
HighT      44       96     83

Pearson's Chi-squared test

data:  contingency_table
X-squared = 58.561, df = 4, p-value = 5.819e-12
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Following the chi-square distribution table of significant values for tests with degrees of freedom equal to 4, the critical value would be 9.488. Since the chi-square value is 58.561, which is much higher than the critical value, the test indicates a high correlation between levels of trust in the government and the PSD index. The p-value is a lot smaller than 0.05, proving that the relationship found by the chi-square test is very significant.

However, while the Chi-squared test establishes a relationship, it does not reveal the strength or direction of the association, making it useful for identifying an initial linkage but insufficient for understanding its nature. A Spearman's rank correlation was performed for each of the age groups previously formed¹⁴ to explain better the nature of the relationship, providing more nuanced insights into the direction and strength of the relationship between trust and the PSD index. Additionally, I was able to control for age. While at first the test was a partial correlation adding gender as another

¹⁴ See Data Description and Wrangling.

control variable, the results weren't as significant as for age, and so this variable was discarded for this test.

The overall negative correlation observed across different age groups suggests that as trust increases, the PSD index for Jordan tends to decrease, or vice versa, although the strength of this relationship varies by age. For example, among younger individuals (18–37 years old), the Spearman's correlation coefficient ($\rho = -0.113$) is weak but statistically significant ($p\text{-value} = 0.000714$), indicating a slight negative relationship. This finding may imply that trust has a less pronounced impact on the PSD index for younger populations, possibly due to other factors, such as engagement with alternative governance models or differing levels of political optimism.

In contrast, the negative relationship strengthens in middle-aged groups. Among individuals aged 38–55, the correlation is $\rho = -0.180$ ($p\text{-value} = 6.486e-07$), and for those aged 56–73, it becomes $\rho = -0.230$ ($p\text{-value} = 1.409e-05$). This progression suggests that trust plays a more significant role in shaping the PSD index as people age, potentially due to increased political awareness, life experiences with governance, or differing levels of trust in democratic institutions. For individuals older than 73, the relationship is the strongest ($\rho = -0.380$, $p\text{-value} = 0.02662$). This sharper correlation may indicate that older adults, being more reliant on stable institutional structures, respond more strongly to variations in trust when evaluating democracy's suitability.

The significant p -values across all tests allow us to reject the null hypothesis, which posited no relationship between trust levels and the PSD index. This rejection confirms a statistically significant association, though the strength and direction of this relationship are negative and vary by age group. The Chi-squared test validates a categorical dependency, while Spearman's correlation highlights the nuanced, age-dependent patterns in the data. These results suggest that demographic factors, such as age, must be considered when exploring the dynamics between trust and the suitability of democracy. For further analysis, incorporating controls for gender, education, or income could offer additional insights.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has explored the factors influencing popular perceptions of the suitability of democracy in Jordan, with a specific focus on trust in government as a potential driver of these opinions. Through a thorough review of the existing literature, it was established that trust in institutions is a recurring theme in shaping democratic legitimacy, especially in regions with political and economic challenges. The hypothesis guiding this research posited that higher levels of government trust would correlate with an improved PSD index. This study sought to test this hypothesis empirically, employing quantitative methods to analyze survey data from the Arab Barometer Wave VII.

The results substantiate the hypothesis, indicating a statistically significant relationship between government trust and the PSD index. The Chi-squared test confirmed an association between trust and the PSD index, while the Spearman's rank correlation demonstrated a negative relationship, the strength of which varied across age groups. For younger populations, the relationship was weaker, potentially reflecting alternative forms of political engagement or distinct sociopolitical influences. Among older age groups, the correlation strengthened, particularly for individuals over 73, suggesting that trust plays a more pronounced role in shaping democratic perceptions as individuals age. These findings underscore the nuanced ways in which demographic factors interact with institutional trust to influence perceptions of governance. This inverse relationship could be explained by further studies including the functions performed by the institutions or even poor results of government management, among others.

In light of these findings, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on democratic governance in Jordan by emphasizing the pivotal role of trust in fostering positive democratic perceptions. It also highlights the importance of demographic segmentation in understanding these dynamics. Additionally, insights from the literature, such as those presented by Teti et al., suggest that the meaning of democracy itself may differ across contexts. Many respondents in Arab countries, including Jordan, prioritize socio-economic rights and anti-corruption measures over the procedural elements of liberal democracy. This broader conception of democracy aligns with findings that support for democracy in principle often contrasts with doubts about its suitability in practice. For some, this may stem from lived experiences with "façade democracies" where political rights are nominal and economic challenges persist, making socioeconomic stability a higher priority.

These results have significant implications for policymakers aiming to bolster democratic legitimacy in Jordan. Efforts to build trust in government institutions should be prioritized, particularly among older populations who demonstrate a stronger relationship between trust and positive democratic perceptions. Educational campaigns, transparency initiatives, and inclusive governance practices could serve as viable strategies to achieve this goal. Moreover, further research should delve deeper into how Jordanians conceptualize democracy, as survey data alone cannot capture the full spectrum of attitudes and priorities. Combining qualitative approaches with quantitative analysis would provide richer insights into why democracy, though widely supported in principle, often faces skepticism in practice. Addressing these gaps will be key to fostering a more robust and inclusive government system in Jordan.

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