



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Predicting Democracy Support in the Middle East and North Africa

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ABSTRACT

Democracy support among Arab citizens has decreased noticeably in the past decade. The Arab Barometer data demonstrates more than an average of 15–30 points drop-in democracy support depending on the country considered. The present research utilizes the seventh wave data set offered by the Arab Barometer conducted between October 2021 and July 2022. The data covers 12 countries including Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, and Kuwait. The investigation examines contemporary predictors of democracy support in the Middle East and North Africa. Utilizing multinomial logistic regression modeling, the current analysis found that older, more educated, and economically optimistic individuals are more likely to support democracy. On the other hand, urban residents, as well as those pessimistic about government performance, are less likely to support democracy. Overall, Arab citizens no longer support democracy at the same rate similar to pre-Arab Spring levels.

1 | Introduction

Democracy support boosts democratic regimes' chances of survival (Fails and Pierce 2010; Hadenius and Teorell 2005). Mass support for democracy translates into more participatory governance (Jamal and Kensicki 2016). Dwindling popular support for democracy correlates with higher chances for emergent episodes of civil strife and unrest (Booth and Seligson 2009). Thus, the study of democracy support constitutes an important field of research across time and space (Inglehart 2003; Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

One out of six Arab countries transitioned successfully to democracy while facing several challenges since the Arab Spring 14 years ago in 2010 (Bernhard 2020). Tunisia was the dark horse breaking all systemic barriers from authoritarianism to democracy while Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen,

and Sudan experienced serious setbacks and civil wars reviving authoritarian rule in the region (Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo 2020). A recent Freedom House report concluded that 90% of the Middle East and North Africa population reside in countries rated not free by the agency (Iftikhar 2024). More concerning is the erosion of popular democratic support among the masses (Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo 2020).

Mass support for democracy has decreased in few Arab countries during the past decade (Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo 2020). Civil unrest, uncertainty about the future, and loss of confidence in democracy as a regime have been cited as the main reasons without rigorous verification (Hadenius and Teorell 2005; Hutchings 2021; Magalhães 2014; Welzel 2007). Little empirical analysis of democracy support decline in the Middle East and North Africa has assessed the relevance and

strength of the varying rival hypotheses attempting to clarify the phenomenon.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the predictors of democracy support in the Middle East and North Africa using the most recent published data from the Arab Barometer. To fulfill this aim, this study sets forth the task of answering the following question: what are the predictors of democracy support in the Middle East and North Africa? The analysis utilized the seventh wave of the Arab Barometer covering 26,000 respondents in 12 countries.

Using multinomial logistic regression, this study established that democracy support is associated with better evaluations of the economy, as well as government performance. Additionally, older citizens tended to support democracy more than younger voters. Higher levels of education attainment were also correlated with higher levels for democracy support. Intentions to migrate and live in urban areas were negatively associated with democracy support across the region. Overall, the class of citizens who are older, attained a high level of education, assessed the economy and government to be well performing were the highest advocates of democracy in the region.

2 | Literature Review

Support for democracy around the world is strong. In a 38 countries public opinion poll by Pew Research Center in 2017, 78% of respondents believed that representative democracy is a very or somewhat good system of government (Wike et al. 2017). In the same survey, 66% of participants agreed that direct democracy was a good governance system (Wike et al. 2017). In a more recent survey of 24 nations in 2024 by the Pew Research Center, 77% and 70% of respondents believed that representative democracy and direct democracy are good governance systems, respectively (Wike et al. 2024). More importantly, the same survey concluded that 83% of respondents believe that military rule is a bad government system (Wike et al. 2024). In recent years, public support for democracy has declined across many parts of the world like the United States and the Middle East and North Africa (Claassen and Magalhães 2023).

2.1 | Democracy Support Among Arab Citizens

Democracy support in the Middle East and North Africa was very high during the first decade of the 21st century. Jamal and Tessler (2008) reported that Arab citizens' support for the statement "despite its drawbacks, democracy is the best system of government" ranged between 83% and 92% in Algeria, Jordan, Palestine, Morocco, and Kuwait. The same study concluded that Arab citizens' support for the statement "having a democratic system in our country would be good" ranged between 81% and 96% according to the first wave data from the Arab Barometer in 2006. At the cusp of the Arab Spring, empirical evidence noted the resilient aspirations for most Arab citizens supporting democracy. For instance, Tessler et al. (2012) concluded, based on the Arab Barometer data, that support for the statement

"despite its drawbacks, democracy is the best system of governance" ranged between 81% and 92% in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, Egypt, and Tunisia.

Past research on democracy support in the Arab world has exhibited stark variability across countries (Ciftci 2013). Using the first wave of the Arab Barometer, Ciftci (2013) argued that support for democracy and Islamic law (Shari'a) was prevalent in 2006 with varying degrees across the region. For instance, Morocco, Kuwait, Yemen, and Jordan featured more than 40% support for democracy and Sharia while Algeria, Palestine, and Lebanon possessed less than 40% support for the same constructs (Ciftci 2013). Using a new measurement method of estimating support for democracy in the Arab World, Ciftci et al. (2019) created an index by merging two statements from the third wave of the project. The statements were "a democratic political system and a political system with an authoritarian president (nondemocratic) who is indifferent to parliament and elections." Using the index that ranged between -3 and 3 , the authors concluded that 63% of respondents held strong support for democracy, which is much lower compared to the First and Second Arab Barometer Waves' estimates (Ciftci et al. 2019). Relying on Arab Barometer responses from Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, and Yemen between 2006 and 2008; Benstead (2015) concluded that 60% of all participants in each of the countries hold favorable views toward democracy (Benstead 2015). By the same token, Benstead (2015) suggested that only 7% of respondents in each of the countries reject democracy as a suitable political system.

For a few years following the Arab Spring, a number of analyses suggested drops in democracy support across the Arab World. Using the fourth wave of the Arab Barometer from 2016, Teti et al. (2019) concluded that support for the statement "democracy is the best system of government despite its faults" decreased from earlier versions of the survey ranging between 61% and 89% in Jordan (89%), Morocco (80%), Egypt (61%), and Tunisia (77%). With respect to Wave Seven of the Arab Barometer completed between 2021 and 2022, support for democracy in the region dropped significantly. For instance, the percentage of citizens who either agreed or disagreed with the statement "democratic systems have problems, yet they are better than other systems" ranged between 54% and 81% in 10 countries (Robbins 2022). More specifically, 81% of Lebanese, 77% of Jordanians, 76% of Mauritians, 72% of Tunisians, 70% of Palestinians, 69% of Sudanese, 69% of Libyans, 68% of Iraqis, 65% of Egyptians, and 54% of Moroccans agreed or strongly agreed with the above statement marking stark declines compared to the 80–90 percentage agreement levels recorded a decade ago.

In assessing the data quality of surveys conducted in the Arab World, Benstead (2017) estimated the levels of democracy rejection across multiple surveys in the same period. The overall conclusion was that the differences in estimates were minimal leading to the assumption that the data within the large-scale surveys like the Arab Barometer is reliable and valid. Incidentally, the analysis also concluded a declining trend of democracy support across all surveys after the Arab Spring regardless of the survey's coverage, sampling, scope, or content

(Benstead 2017). Evidence from the latest waves of the Arab Barometer has indicated the steady decline of democracy support in the region (Robbins 2022). In all countries included in the seventh waves, democracy support is lower compared to its levels before the Arab Spring among most segments of society across Arab countries (Jamal and Robbins 2022).

3 | Demographic Attributes and Support for Democracy

3.1 | Age

A popular belief among the general public is that people become more conservative and approve strong leadership or authoritarian tendencies as they age (Peterson et al. 2020). Said alternatively, people become more conservative the older they are (Peterson et al. 2020). Despite such deeply rooted folk wisdom, political science research has indicated that attitudes are remarkably stable regardless of age (Alwin and Krosnick 1991; Inglehart 1985; Jennings and Niemi 1978). Nevertheless, when political perceptions shift, they more likely occur among liberals who become more conservative compared to the opposite scenario as they age (Peterson et al. 2020). The association between age and democratic perceptions is not uniform across the world (Peterson et al. 2020; Stenning 2023). Silver and Fetterolf (2024) concluded that older individuals in the United States are less likely to support military rule or authoritarian leadership. For instance, 38% of the youth (under the age of 30) reported support for the two authoritarian regime types compared to 29% of those between the ages of 50 and 65, and 26% of those over the age of 65. The relationship is different in other countries like Greece, Japan, and South Korea where older individuals are more supportive of authoritarianism (Silver and Fetterolf 2024).

4 | Gender

One stream of the literature argues that females are less likely to support democracy compared to males (García-Peñalosa and Konte 2014). García-Peñalosa and Konte (2014) concluded that in low-income countries, once females attain high levels of human development and education, the gender democracy difference weakens. Analyzing gender differences on democratic attitudes in 29 European countries, Hansen and Goenaga (2021) concluded that females place less importance on representative institutions, political parties, and the media. On the other hand, Hansen and Goenaga (2021) also found females to be more concerned about the protection of social rights, transparency, and political participation like taking part in referenda. One explanation is the aspects emphasized by females concerning democracy break down gender barriers in society while the aspects less supported by females reproduce gender disparities (Hansen and Goenaga 2021).

4.1 | Area (Urban/Rural)

The rural-urban cleavage has affected democracy support throughout time and space (Taylor et al. 2024). In a recent study, Mettler and Brown (2022) concluded that rural citizens

in the United States preferred conservative values compared to urban residents who espoused more liberal norms. The authors argued that rural citizens preferred strong executive leaders compared to representative indirect institutions operating the democratic system (Mettler and Brown 2022). In a similar study, Lago (2022) found that rural citizens in 27 European countries were less satisfied with democracy compared to urban residents. Further, in countries witnessing high levels of urbanization, rural citizens' dissatisfaction with democracy increases (Mettler and Brown 2022). Extensive evidence from the United States notes that rural citizens align with the Republican Party values and norms while urban citizens identify with the Democratic Party policies and standings (Gimpel et al. 2020; Jacobs and Munis 2023; Miller and Schofield 2008). Several studies alluded to the waning support for democracy among rural citizens who believe that the system has marginalized them favoring elites in cities (Kresch 2020; Nelsen and Petsko 2021).

4.2 | Education

The relationship between education attainment and support for democracy has been extensively researched, generating contradictory results. In a panel online survey of Dutch voters, Coffé and Michels (2014) reported that citizens with low levels of educational attainment preferred direct democracy over representative democracy compared to highly educated voters. Nevertheless, the study demonstrated that once more variables are controlled by multivariate models, such distinctions dissipate (Coffé and Michels 2014). Consistent with the above conclusion, Österman and Robinson (2023) found no difference in support for democracy conditional on various levels of education in democratic and authoritarian countries. The authors argued that high levels of education made citizens more satisfied with democracy if they lived in democratic countries. On the other, democracy made people dissatisfied with the system if citizens lived under authoritarian rule (Österman and Robinson 2023).

4.3 | Economic Evaluation and Democracy Support

The evaluation of the state of the economy directly affects individuals' perceptions of the quality and performance of democracy in their countries (Claassen and Magalhães 2022; Daoust and Nadeau 2021). Tang and Huhe (2020) analyzed data from 18 Latin American democracies and concluded that higher governmental engagement in the economy generating positive gains is strongly correlated with democratic satisfaction among voters. Relatedly, when citizens exhibit positive perceptions of economic performance, they are more likely to approve of their political regime (Abduljaber et al. 2025; Damstra and Boukes 2021). Such a finding is supported in both democracies and nondemocracies (Colagrossi et al. 2020). For instance, surveys in Saudi Arabia found that citizens are satisfied with their political regime as a function of high economic performance in their country (Alharbi and Alshammari 2020; Daoust and Nadeau 2021). Similar findings were reported from the United States and Western Europe, which are democracies

(Claassen and Magalhães 2022). Negative evaluations of the economy have devastating effects on democracy perceptions. Loveless (2010) found that increased perceptions of excessive inequities in Eastern European member states to the EU lead to feelings of distrust, apathy, and disengagement. Further, the study reported higher levels of dissatisfaction with democracy among those reporting the highest perceptions of income inequality (Loveless 2010). Such results are consistent with the three-decades-old seminal study by Evans and Whitefield (1995) reporting significant correlations between economic evaluation and support for democracy in the newly democratic former Soviet republics in the mid-1990s.

4.4 | Government Performance and Democracy Support

Government performance is a strong predictor of mass support for democracy in democratic countries (Magalhães 2014). The higher the quality of the policy-making process and delivery, the more support democracy enjoys among the masses (Magalhães 2014). Cameron (2020) argued that rising levels of economic uncertainty in Australia forcing the government to change Prime Ministers frequently in the past two decades led to a loss of trust in government performance resulting in diminishing support for democracy. More nuanced research linked mass support for democracy with specific performance patterns among governments. Claassen and Magalhães (2022) argued that better performance in sustaining economic growth and controlling violent crimes increases mass support for democracy. In the same study, improved delivery of healthcare quality, however, did not have any bearing on mass support. In a similar vein, Becher et al. (2024) concluded that the way leaders handle large scale crises like the COVID-19 pandemic affects how people view democracy. In a 12-country study, the authors argued that successful policies addressing COVID-19 exigencies resulted in higher levels of democracy support.

4.5 | Political Interest and Democracy Support

Scholars have argued that lower political interest generates limited civic engagement and limited political knowledge leading to decreased participation in democratic activities like voting (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019). On the contrary, higher levels of political knowledge are associated with improved perceptions of democratic principles and manifestations (Galston 2001; Graham 2020; Hutchings 2021). Civic education strengthens individuals' understanding and adoption of democratic orientations (Finkel and Ernst 2005). Being interested in politics raise individuals' concerns about one's livelihood within the larger community, and systems making people pay further attention to the meaning of political regimes (Carr 2013; Scoones 2013). Following global trends on the news, people realize the goods and quality of life observed in advanced economies that are largely democratic, making them more supportive of such regimes (Diamond 2002; Jensen 2003). Democracy perceptions experience little change as individuals age and become more engrossed with political debates and affairs (Ridge 2022). Nieuwelink et al. (2018) followed 40 Dutch adolescents investigating changes in their democratic norms as

a function of increasing political consumption through elevating their interest in politics with a plethora of activities. The study reported the development of one-dimensional understanding of democracy as the majority rule. Also, the authors suggested that support for democracy increased over time; however, concepts like minority rights or consensus building remained marginal in the conception of democracy.

4.6 | Emigration Tendency and Democracy Support

The intent to migrate from one's country influences individuals' perceptions of democracy. On the one hand, intention to migrate reflects a general dissatisfied state of mind and wellbeing, creating negative perceptions about one's environment (De Haas 2021). Such a negative feeling produces bad ratings of government systems and institutions (Czaika and Reinprecht 2022; Milasi 2020). Similarly, immigration intent is correlated with perceived improvement in economic wellbeing (Kwilinski et al. 2022). People who express the intention to migrate desire better futures and, therefore, are more likely to hold negative perceptions about their own government systems (Alrababah et al. 2023; Niva et al. 2021). Such arguments are held in both democracies and nondemocracies (De Haas 2021; Milasi 2020).

5 | Methodology

5.1 | Research Design

This analysis utilizes secondary data analysis to perform the research. Secondary data analysis entails the use of already collected data for a new purpose (Abdillah et al. 2020). In this study, Arab Barometer data are used as the source of information (Arab Barometer 2024). In 2006, the Arab Barometer published its first wave of survey data reporting on ordinary citizens' attitudes toward the government, the economy, foreign affairs, and quality of governance. In this study, the seventh wave, which is the most recent data, is used to investigate levels of democracy support in the Arab World. Further, the analysis investigates determinants of democracy support using many variables within the data set.

5.1.1 | Data

The present research utilized the largest available data on the opinions and attitudes of ordinary citizens in the Middle East and North Africa since the COVID-19 pandemic: The Arab Barometer Seventh Wave. The Wave covered a total of 12 countries accounting for 80% of residents in the Arab League member states or what is known as the Arab World. National representative samples from Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Kuwait, Iraq, and Mauritania participated in the Wave. The Arab Barometer Seventh Wave spanned from October 2021 until July 2022. The project received funding from the Middle East Partnership Initiatives, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), National Endowment for Democracy (NED), British

Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Carnegie Corporation in New York, Princeton University, and the University of Michigan. Survey interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants increasing the reliability and accuracy of information. The seventh wave covered a wide range of topics including, but not limited to, citizens' ratings of the economy, government, democracy, and gender norms. For more details about the questions on the survey, one may visit the site and view the codebook.

5.1.2 | Participants

A total of 26,000 participants completed the seventh wave Arab Barometer survey. The target population for the survey was citizens of the respective countries that are 18 years of age or older. Most respondents completed the survey in Arabic. In many countries, local languages preferred to participants were used such as Kurdish in the Northern parts of Iraq. Institutionalized populations, internally displaced people in refugee camps, and populations residing in insecure areas were excluded. National representative samples using stratified or probability random sampling, and most of the time a combination of both provided the methods for selecting participants in the research. General Census data from the latest records were used as the sampling frames for the researchers. In each country, the Arab Barometer team established partnerships with local institutes or polling agencies to facilitate the implementation of the project.

5.1.3 | Data Collection

Each interview lasted for approximately 45 min (Arab Barometer 2024). Face-to-face meetings occurred in a private setting chosen by respondents, which in many cases was their home or residence. The responses of participants were recorded on a tablet given to interviewees who selected the choices voiced by participants. Interviewees received extensive training on how to use the tablet and performed several mock interviews before taking part in the real project.

5.1.4 | Measures

The Arab Barometer does not provide a specific definition of democracy. Nevertheless, the codebooks provide an idea on how the designers conceptualize democracy. For instance, the survey asks respondents whether they voted, participated in political events or joined interest groups (Arab Barometer 2024). By the same token, the codebooks included statements about the responsiveness of the legislature, courts systems, the politics, and other institutions to citizens demands and preferences (Arab Barometer 2024). Therefore, one may surmise that the Arab Barometer takes a broad understanding of democracy beyond the minimal procedural standards. Given the presence of many substantive characteristics of democracy in Arab Barometer surveys, the original architects of the project conceptualized democracy as a political system characterized by responsive institutions to citizens who freely partake in political

action endangering peaceful transfers of power, as well as social change through representative mechanisms.

Table 1 presents the variables selected for the current analysis. The dependent variable is participants' support for democracy. To capture Arab citizens' support for democracy, one nominal measure asking respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following statements provided the necessary information.

Support for democracy is stronger if a citizen chooses "democracy is always preferred" in comparison to the remaining two statements. Table 1 presents a number of independent variables that have been shown to affect citizens' support for democracy. For instance, demographic variables like age, education, residence, and gender were included. Further, political interest, the evaluation of the state of the economy, intent to migrate, and government performance rating were also included. Table 1 provides the wording for each question and how it was measured in the seventh wave code book of the Arab Barometer.

5.1.5 | Data Analysis

Multinomial logistic regression presents the most appropriate modeling statistical method in this study. The dependent variable is a nominal measure, and therefore ordinary least squares, and its extensions are inappropriate since they require continuous or ordinal dependent variables. MLR generates a wealth of output that informs readers about the direction and strength of relationships between a set of independent variables and a dependent variable (Liang et al. 2020). Coefficients in MLR represent the change in log odds in a dependent variable given units change on the independent variables. By the same token, analogous to odd ratios in Logistic Regression, MLR generates relative risk ratios. Such ratios could be interpreted as whether selecting one of the nominal options is more likely compared to other options once changes on the independent variable occur.

6 | Results

6.1 | Comparing Type of Government Does Not Matter Versus Democracy Always Preferable

Table 2 presents the results of the Multinomial Logistic Regression model predicting Arab citizens' democracy support. The number of observations included in the model estimation was 17,529. The likelihood ratio chi-square value of 325,14 with an observed significance level (p -value) of less than 0.01 suggested that the overall model is statistically significant and performed better than an empty model. The relative log odds of choosing the statement "type of government does not matter" increased by 0.36 if moving from the highest satisfaction level with the economy compared to the lowest. In other words, citizens who reported higher satisfaction with the economy were more likely to choose the type of government that does not matter if it is an option compared to the "democracy is always preferable" statement.

Concerning government performance, the relative log odds of choosing the "type of government does not matter" decreased

TABLE 1 | List of variables included in this study.

Variable name	Arab barometer survey questions	Data coding and answer choices
1. Democracy support	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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1: Type of government does not matter • 2: Nondemocratic government sometimes preferable • 3: Democracy always preferable
2. Economic evaluation	How would you evaluate the current economic situation in your country?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1: Very bad • 2: Bad • 3: Good • 4: Very good
3. Government performance	How satisfied are you with the following? The government's performance overall in our country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1: Completely dissatisfied • 2: Dissatisfied • 3: Satisfied • 4: Completely satisfied
4. Political interest	In general, to what extent are you interested in politics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1: Very uninterested • 2: Uninterested • 3: Interested • 4: Very interested
5. Emigration tendency	Some people decide to leave their countries to live somewhere else. Have you *ever thought about emigrating from your country?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0: No • 1: Yes
6. Age	How old are you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Between 18 and 95
7. Gender	What is your gender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0: Male • 1: Female
8. Area	What is your settlement type?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 0: Rural • 1: Urban
9. Education	What is your highest level of education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1: No formal education • 2: Elementary • 3: Preparatory/Basic • 4: Secondary • 5: Mid-level diploma • 6: BA • 7: MA or above

by 0.076 for every unit increase on the four levels ordinal measure. Alternatively, individuals who reported the highest satisfaction level with government performance were less likely to agree with the statement indicating an indifference toward the type of political regime compared with “democracy is always preferable” option. In a similar vein, the log odds of choosing “type of government does not matter” significantly decreased by 0.19 for every additional unit on the political interest ordinal measure always compared with preferring democracy. Thus, citizens who reported that the highest level of interest in politics were more likely supportive of democracy compared to reporting no difference.

Additionally, the log odds of selecting the “type of government does not matter” increased by 0.89 when citizens indicated an intent to

migrate from their country compared with others who answered “no” to the immigration intent question. Therefore, Arab citizens who are actively seeking migration were more likely to indicate a no difference preference to political regimes compared to those who indicated no intent for immigration. Age had a negative impact on choosing “type of government does not matter” compared with “democracy is always preferable.” For every additional year, the log odds of selecting the no preference difference option compared to the democracy option decreased by 0.0086.

Females tended to select “type of government does not matter” significantly less than males when compared to the “democracy is always preferable” option. The only statistically insignificant variable in predicting whether citizens would choose the no difference option over the democracy option was residence

TABLE 2 | Multinomial logistic regression (MLR) results for support for the democracy variable.

Democracy support categories	Variables	Coefficient	Standard error	Confidence level
Category 1: Type of government does not matter	Economic evaluation		(Base level)	
	Very bad			
	Bad	−0.308	0.044	n/a
	Good	0.223	0.053	***
	Very good	0.368	0.130	***
	Government performance	−0.076	0.021	***
	Political interest	−0.197	0.020	**
	Emigration tendency	−0.107	0.042	***
	Age	−0.008	0.001	***
	Gender	0.105	0.038	***
	Area	−0.063	0.040	n/a
	Education	−0.066	0.012	***
Category 2: Nondemocratic government sometimes preferable	Economic evaluation		(Base Level)	
	Very bad			
	Bad	0.038	0.045	n/a
	Good	0.011	0.057	n/a
	Very good	−0.445	0.170	***
	Government performance	0.017	0.021	n/a
	Political interest	0.046	0.039	**
	Emigration tendency	−0.024	0.043	n/a
	Age	−0.005	0.001	***
	Gender	0.007	0.040	n/a
	Area	0.081	0.043	**
	Education	0.022	0.013	**
Category 3: Democracy always preferable		(Base Outcome)		
Number of observations		17,529		
LR χ^2		325.410		
Prob > χ^2		0.000		
Pseudo R^2		0.009		

*** Denotes 99%.

** Denotes 95%.

* Denotes 90% confidence level.

location. Rural and urban citizens did not differ when given the two options above. On the other hand, the log odds of selecting “type of government does not matter” decreased by 0.06 for every additional unit increase on the education measure compared to choosing democracy is always preferable. In other words, higher levels of education are associated with choosing democracy as the preferable system when citizens have the choice to select such an option besides the no difference choice.

Moving to the second half of Table 2 where the comparison was made between “democracy is always preferable” and “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable,” one notices specific prediction patterns. On the one hand, the log odds of selecting the nondemocratic option decreased by 0.44 if moving

from the highest satisfaction level with the economy to the least satisfaction level compared to choosing the democracy preference statement. In other words, citizens who rated the economy to have a stellar performance are less likely to choose “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” over “democracy is always preferable.”

Government performance ratings appeared to have no statistical significance in predicting whether citizens would choose between “democracy is always preferable” and “nondemocracies are sometimes preferable.” On the other hand, political interest seemed to be statistically significant in predicting whether citizens choose democracy over nondemocracy options. The log odds of choosing “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” increased

by 0.046 for every additional unit increase on political interest compared to choosing “democracy is always preferable.” The intent to migrate appears to have no statistical significance in discriminating between those who chose the democracy statement and those who did not.

As citizens in the Arab World age, their likelihood of choosing “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” decreased. The log odds of selecting such a statement decreased by 0.005 for every unit increase on the age variable compared with choosing the democracy preference statement. With respect to gender, however, males and females tended to exhibit no statistically significant difference in choosing between the democracy and nondemocracy statements.

With respect to residence location, and education level, both variables appeared to be statistically significant at the 0.10 level. On the one hand, living in urban areas was associated with higher log odds of choosing the nondemocracy statement option compared to the democracy statement option. Also, higher levels of educational attainment were associated with higher log odds of selecting the nondemocracy option compared to the democracy statement.

Table 3 shows the relative risk ratios for each independent variable in the multinomial logistic regression model. If the ratio is less than 1, then the likelihood of exposure to the category within the dependent variable decreases as the independent variable increases. On the other hand, if the ratio is more than 1, the likelihood of exposure to the category within the

TABLE 3 | MLR relative risk ratios (RRR) results for support for the democracy variable.

Democracy support categories	RRR	Coefficient	Standard error	Confidence level
Category 1: Type of government does not matter	Economic evaluation		(Base Level)	
	Very bad			
	Bad	0.969	0.043	n/a
	Good	1.250	0.066	***
	Very good	1.445	0.188	***
	Government performance	0.926	0.019	***
	Political interest	0.821	0.017	***
	Emigration tendency	0.898	0.037	**
	Age	0.991	0.001	***
	Gender	1.111	0.042	***
	Area	0.938	0.037	n/a
	Education	0.935	0.011	***
Category 2: Nondemocratic government sometimes preferable	Economic evaluation		(Base Level)	
	Very bad			
	Bad	1.039	0.047	n/a
	Good	1.011	0.058	n/a
	Very good	0.640	0.109	***
	Government performance	1.017	0.022	n/a
	Political interest	1.047	0.021	**
	Emigration tendency	0.976	0.042	n/a
	Age	0.994	0.001	***
	Gender	1.007	0.040	n/a
	Area	1.084	0.046	*
	Education	1.022	0.013	*
Category 3: Democracy always preferable		(Base outcome)		
Number of observations		17,529		
LR χ^2		325.410		
Prob > χ^2		0.000		
Pseudo R^2		0.009		

*** Denotes 99%.

** Denotes 95%.

* Denotes 90% confidence level.

independent variable increases as the independent variable increases. If the ratio is equal to 1, the likelihood of exposure is the same between the two categories compared to the dependent variable regardless of changes in the independent measure.

Given the results in the model, citizens are 1.44 times more likely to choose “government type does not matter” compared to choosing “democracy is always preferable” when moving from very unsatisfied with the economy to very satisfied with the economy. On the other hand, citizens are 0.64 times less likely to choose “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” compared to “democratic governments are always preferable” if economic evaluation increases from very unsatisfied to very satisfied.

With respect to government performance, citizens are 0.92 times less likely to choose “government type does not matter” compared to “democracy is always preferable” when ratings of government performance increase by a single unit. On the other hand, the ratios of choosing “democracy is always preferable” compared to “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” do not statistically differ given changes in government performance ratings.

Concerning political interest, citizens were 0.82 less likely to choose “government type does not matter” compared to “democracy is always preferable” if political interest increases by one unit. On the other hand, citizens were 1.04 more likely to choose “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” compared with “democracy is always preferable” if political interest increased by one unit.

On the intent to migrate from one’s country, citizens were 0.89 less likely to select “government type does not matter” compared with “democracy is always preferable” if they suggested an intent to leave the country. On the contrary, the ratio of selecting either “democracy is always preferable” or “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” did not statistically differ.

Citizens were 0.99 less likely to choose “democracy is preferable” compared with the other two statements as age

increased. Both relationships were statistically significant even though both ratios were close to 1.00. In addition, females were 1.11 times more likely to choose “government type does not matter” compared with “democracy is always preferable.” On the other hand, the ratios of selecting “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” compared to the democracy preference statement did not statistically differ for males or females. With respect to residence locale, the ratios of selection did not differ between rural or urban citizens when the comparison was made between “government type does not matter” and “democracy is always preferable.” Urban citizens were 1.08 times more likely to select “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” compared with “democracy is always preferable.”

Citizens were 0.93 less likely to choose “government type does not matter” compared with “democracy is always preferable” for each unit increase on the education measure. By the same token, citizens were 1.02 more likely to choose “nondemocratic governments are so sometimes preferable” compared to “democracy is always preferable” for each unit increase on the education scale. Note that both location and education were statistically significant at 0.10 as opposed to the other variances evident by the *p*-values in the table.

One of the interesting associations from the multinomial logistic regression results is the relationship between political interest and democracy support. On the one hand, the association was negative between the two variables when the comparison was made between “government type does not matter” and “democracy is always preferable.” On the other hand, the association between the two variables was positive when the comparison was made between “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” and “democracy is always preferable.” To further investigate this relationship, Figure 1 depicts frequencies for each combination of responses on the two metrics.

The figure indicates that the number of citizens who indicated the highest level of political interest (4) was three times more

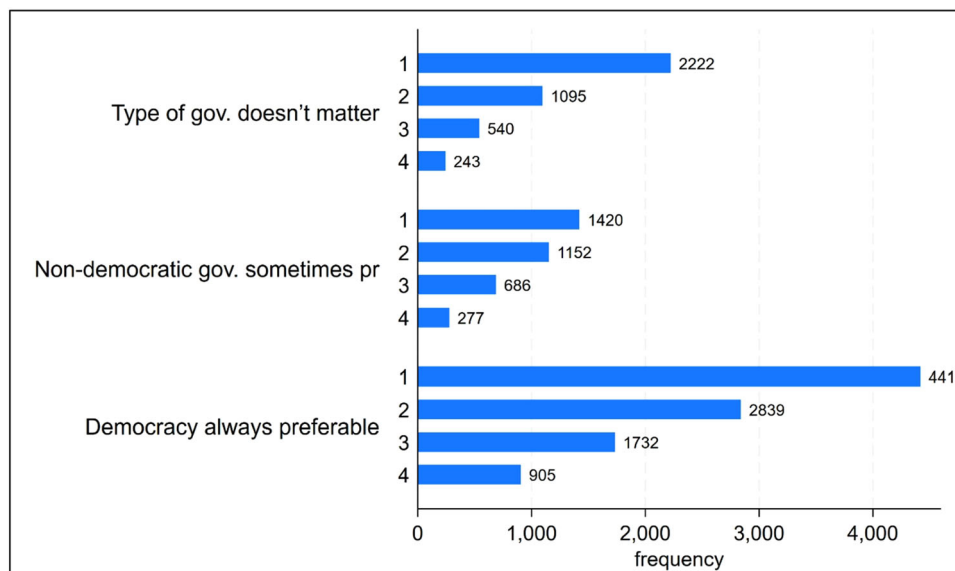


FIGURE 1 | Categorical frequencies between political interest and democracy support variables.

frequent among those choosing “democracy is always preferable” compared to those who selected “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable.” A similar narrative is true when one compares the number of citizens who choose (3) on political interest, indicating some interest between the two statements. Thus, higher levels of political interest appear to correlate more with democracy preference especially among citizens who self-reported higher levels of political interest.

In a similar line of thought, when one compares the frequencies of political interest in the two groups who chose “government type does not matter” and “democracy is always preferable,” one could observe that each frequency is lower among the no preference for regime type group. Simply put, the number of citizens on every combination was lower among those who agreed with the statement “government type does not matter” compared to the group who agreed with “democracy is always preferable” hence causing the negative association.

Figure 2 presents the association between citizens' evaluation of the economy and their levels for democracy support. Note that the multinomial logistic regression showed statistically significant associations in the two comparison scenarios warranties further investigation. Focusing on the group of citizens who indicated that the economy is performing well at the highest level (4), one may observe that the number of individuals who agreed with “democracy is always preferable” is much higher compared to the other two groups. Similarly, the frequency within the “government type does not matter” is higher compared with “nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable” within the highest satisfaction group (4). Therefore, high satisfaction correlates negatively with support for nondemocratic governments.

7 | Discussion and Critical Commentary

One of the noteworthy remarks emerging from this study pertains to the conceptualization of democracy. The Arab Barometer's characterization of democracy falls within the liberal

parameters of the concept assuming respect for civil liberties and political rights under representative responsible institutions. Such a reality is far from political systems in the Arab World. Regimes in the region are largely authoritarian and when democracy exists like in Tunisia or other countries, illiberal democracy prevails. Illiberal democracy refers to obtaining power using democratic means and then using institutions to restrict opposing views and constrain civil liberties marginalizing opponents. Relatedly, citizens' perceptions of democracy may not necessarily align with the views of the survey designers. For instance, a Jordanian citizen may provide full support for democracy while approving of minority rights restrictions because of his or her Islamic leanings. Thus, when the Arab Barometer democracy support items are discussed, one needs to be aware of the differences with respect to democracy definitions.

A major theoretical contribution of the present analysis is the crystallized link between the quality of liberal democratic institutions and support for democracy. In countries where institutions are minimally functioning or absent altogether like Iraq and Libya, support for democracy is much lower compared to Jordan and Tunisia. Relatedly, democracy support from the perspectives of citizens is linked with the quality of administrative and economic goods and services received in their respective countries. Thus, indicators of democracy surveys in regions like the Middle East should be expanded to incorporate specific elements of illiberal democracy.

Variability in democracy support in the Arab World is partly caused by the damage experienced throughout the transition. For instance, the drops in democracy support in Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Algeria were markedly lower than those observed in Iraq and Libya. One of the potential explanations is the continued institutional functioning of delivering basic public goods and services. In countries where institutions still functioned even at a moderate level, democracy support dwindled at a much slower pace compared to countries that experienced major shut-downs in institutions and public services like utilities.

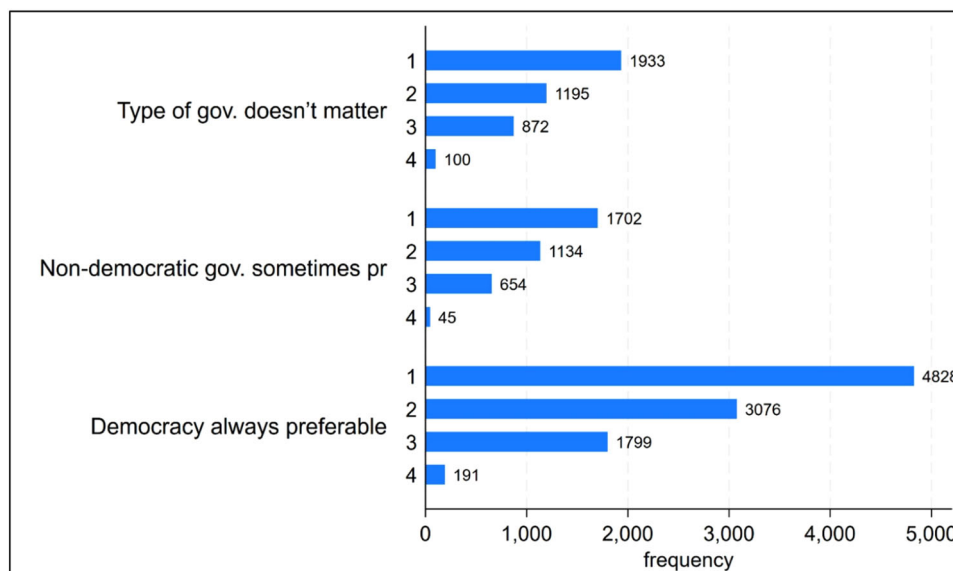


FIGURE 2 | Categorical frequencies between evaluation of the economy and democracy support variables.

One of the potential explanations for the decay of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa is the ailing popular support for democracy as the preferable regime type (Fails and Pierce 2010; Hadenius and Teorell 2005; Jamal and Kensicki 2016). Political scientists have argued that when democracy support is high in societies, its survival and consolidation improve (Booth and Seligson 2009; Inglehart 2003; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). On the contrary, once societies face serious challenges like civil wars, invasions, economic meltdowns, or chaos, and strife would dominate if democracy enjoyed little to no support (Norris 2011; Lingling Qi and Doh Chull Shin 2011; Welzel 2007).

The present analysis notes the presence of a different variant of the relationship between economic status and democracy support. Contradictory to a few studies in the literature citing a positive link between economic satisfaction and democracy support in the West, the present study documented a negative effect. Economically optimistic Arab citizens were more indifferent to choosing democracy is always preferred compared to other groups (Kostanecki 2022). One potential explanation is that some Arab citizens equate economic well-being with a working political system regardless of its type. Such a logic entails that citizens will support democracy more if they are economically depressed. Thus, studies from the Gulf Cooperation Countries reported lower support for democracy compared to other Arab nations given the better economic conditions experienced (Kostanecki 2022).

Congruent with earlier research on the importance of institutions, the present analysis corroborated the theoretical link between citizens' preferences for well-functioning institutions and democracy support. Individuals who rated government performance as the highest category reported high levels of democracy support. Past research has demonstrated that democracy and responsible institutions or government go hand-in-hand (Acemoglu and Robinson 2022; Kiess 2022; Mettler and Brown 2022). Such a relationship also extends to citizens' preferences (Acemoglu and Robinson 2022).

Another theoretical contribution of the present analysis is the effect of civic responsibility on democracy support. Citizens who exhibited an intent to migrate, which indicates a low level of civic engagement or interest in building the nation, expressed the most indifference to political systems. Migration also indicates a loss of interest in making one's government more responsible or representative, creating an apathy toward political change. Thus, models of democracy support prediction should include indicators of general satisfaction with life or the system as proxies for civic engagement or responsibility construct.

Demographic compositions of Arab countries carry an effect on democracy support. Evidence from this study shows that females are more likely to choose democracy as always preferred compared to an indifference to the political system position. Similarly, older individuals are less likely to be indifferent with respect to political systems and prefer democracy when compared to nondifference statements. Thus, countries with educated elites, especially with a high proportion of females, will be more likely to exhibit more support for

democracy. Lebanon illustrates such an argument where a large, educated class of females constantly lobby for women's liberation under a feminist umbrella. Jordan also fits the mold to a lesser extent exhibiting a steady support for democracy with a lower decay difference compared to other countries.

Levels of political interest among citizens could explain some of the variability in democracy support decline across countries. Higher political interest was associated with further support for democracy. Nevertheless, Arab countries differ with respect to political interest or sophistication (Al-Ississ and Diwan 2016; Al-Suwaidi 1995). For instance, the sharpest decline of democracy support between 2016 (Arab Barometer Wave IV) and 2021 (Arab Barometer Wave IV) was in Morocco, at about 30 points. One of the potential explanations is the dwindling interest in party politics within the country in the past decade (Cimini 2023). Similarly, Iraq and Libya witnessed little political stability rendering citizens' participation to be low in the political realm leading to sharper declines in democracy support compared to Jordan and Lebanon, which had witnessed a series of local and parliamentary elections in the past decade.

One of the theoretical contributions of the present research is the significance of economic variables in understanding democracy from the perspective of ordinary citizens. A survey of the literature demonstrates that most definitions of democracy focus on political or institutional elements of regimes (Bogaards 2009; Diamond 2003). On the one hand, Schumpeter (1942), Huntington (1991), and Przeworski (2000) all focus on elections, transfer of power, procedural aspects, and institutional characteristics when defining democracy. In this study, economic indicators such as the evaluation of the economy or the intent to migrate were more powerful compared to government performance and political interest in predicting support for democracy. Such evidence calls for revisiting definitions of democracy to reflect what is important in the eyes of citizens.

Another contribution this study highlights is the importance of political historical legacies defining countries' political development. For instance, many countries like Iraq, Libya, Sudan, and Algeria experienced long periods of authoritarian stable rule, which rendered pluralism minimal. On the other hand, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Morocco experienced several large-scale free and fair elections where political parties over the years published distinct manifestos representing a modicum of pluralism under authoritarian reign. Thus, the decline in democracy support fluctuated more in countries that experienced long periods of authoritarianism without holding several elections. For instance, Jordan, Kuwait, and Lebanon experienced lower drops of democracy support compared to Libya, Iraq, and Sudan in the past two decades. Such an observation is partly explained by citizens' exposure to pluralism.

7.1 | Policy Implications

The Arab Spring provided authoritarian leaders and governments with valuable lessons in the region. To avoid catastrophic loss of power, leaders must heed citizens' demands at least minimally to maintain control over entire populations. Evidence from this study notes the importance of

economic indicators in the eyes of ordinary citizens when understanding democracy. While citizens' support for democracy decreased, they still demand effective and efficient public services. Thus, authoritarian governments interested in survival must move away from the sole security approach followed by the Syrian or Yemeni governments during the Arab Spring, which failed as it did elsewhere in the region. Arab populations revolted in the Arab Spring mainly because of the lack of fulfillment to the bare minimum of political and economic aspirations. Thus, government officials in the region are urged to inject a modicum of economic stimulus, as well as liberalization spaces, to maintain their competitive authoritarian rule.

One of the main policy implications emerging from the present research is the need for engaging the mass public in democratic educational or participatory campaigns. The evidence in this study suggests that Arab citizens equate democracy with economic effectiveness and efficiency at times. Thus, education institutions need to engage in learning campaigns aimed at explaining the varieties of democracy to ordinary citizens. Relatedly, civil society groups and political associations or parties need to ameliorate day-to-day engagement, allowing people to better understand what democracy covers.

7.2 | Future Research Directions

One of the reasons causing several contradictory results to appear in the democracy support literature is the use of different measures, metrics, methods, data, surveys, and time periods. To mitigate methodological limitations, future researchers are urged to test associations or models using a diversity of democracy support measures. Support is a subjective assessment. Each survey item may capture a portion of support or a different manifestation of it. Therefore, to safely state that there is a statistical relationship between one measure and democracy support, researchers ought to utilize different items or scales in the same study. Multi-items and multi-methods research projects are encouraged in the future study of democracy support.

Democracy support is sensitive to the period or conditions affecting respondents' country at the time of measurement. Thus, cross-sectional research only provides a snapshot of the actual association between democracy support and its predictors. To better assess the associations linking democracy support with other variables, future researchers are encouraged to utilize longitudinal analysis and especially game theoretical approaches which enable analysis of actors at the micro level (Onder 2019a, 2019b). Furthermore, the scope and frequency of countries sanctioned with economic measures in the Middle East and North African region increased after the dissolution of the USSR (Onder 2023). In this regard, several studies examined the connection between democracy support and being targeted with economic sanctions (Abduljaber and Onder 2024). Thus, it is important to examine the impact of economic sanctions on the level of democracy support. Measurements on democracy support including the same countries or samples for a long period of time need to be compiled for better assessments to be obtained.

7.3 | Limitations

Like any other research, the present analysis suffers from limitations. First, the data included in the study is cross-sectional in design preventing the authors from making causal statements about the relationships observed (Abduljaber 2018; Onder 2021). Relatedly, multinomial logistic regression is a statistical modeling technique capable of identifying relationships among a set of variables rather than drawing causal links between them. Besides natural experimental conditions, researchers are left with no choice but to utilize observational and longitudinal methods to study democracy support.

In any correlational analysis, model specification becomes an important matter that preoccupies researchers' minds and decisions (Abduljaber 2020; Onder 2022). Given the large number of variables cited in the literature as predictors of democracy support, the researchers needed to make choices. Such decisions altered the quality of the model. The available data does not contain metrics on every possible predictor. Thus, omitted variable bias may affect the accuracy of the estimates from the regression analysis.

8 | Conclusions

When given the two choices of "the type of government does not matter" and "democracy is always preferable," the likelihood of Arab citizens selecting one statement compared to the other increases under certain conditions. If an ordinary citizen reported satisfaction with the economy and government performance, he or she is more likely to prefer democracy over the no difference choice. By the same token, given the empirical findings, if an individual reported a high level of political interest, does not intend to migrate out of the country, and has high level of education, then his or her support for the democracy preference statement increases. Females and older citizens were found to prefer democracy over the no difference statement regardless of variations in other characteristics. The residential status in rural or urban areas did not have any predictive bearing over whether citizens preferred democracy or no democracy options.

Choosing "nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable" over "democracy is always preferable" was more likely given a particular set of perceptual and demographic attributes. On the one hand, if a citizen viewed the economy as badly performing, he or she was more likely to select the non-democracy statement compared to the democracy option. Additionally, when individuals self-reported a high level of political interest, they were more likely to agree with the statement indicating that nondemocratic governments are sometimes preferable compared with choosing "democracy is always preferable." As age decreases, the likelihood of selecting the nondemocracy statement over the democracy preference option increases. Lower levels of education and living in urban areas were associated with higher chances of selecting the nondemocracy statement compared to the democracy option.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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