

Political Attitudes of Yemenis toward Democracy and Its Related to Mental Health

Yemenlilerin Demokrasiye Yönelik Siyasi Tutumu ve Ruh Sağlığıyla İlişkisi

Abstract

Political attitudes towards democracy are one of the most important issues in the Arab political arena, especially in countries that have entered into civil war. In times of crisis, it becomes very important to pay attention and focus on studying the opinions and attitudes of citizens toward issues related to authority. The current study aims to study the political attitudes of Yemenis toward democracy. The results of the Arab Parameter Survey 2018 related to democracy and issues associated with it and its relationship to mental health were analyzed. The current study found that Yemenis' interest in politics was low. Although the state of armed polarization that the country is experiencing, Yemenis' attitudes toward democracy were generally positive. More than half of the study participants stated that democracy is the best system of government. Also, the result revealed that Yemeni males are more interested in politics than females. The current study demonstrated that Yemenis' attitudes toward democracy are affected by mental health. Depression and stressors were negative predictors of individuals' attitudes toward democracy.

Özet

Demokrasiye yönelik siyasi tutumlar, Arap siyasi arenasında, özellikle de iç savaşa girmiş ülkelerde en önemli konulardan biridir. Kriz zamanlarında vatandaşların otoriteyle ilgili konulara ilişkin görüş ve tutumlarını incelemek ve bunlara odaklanmak çok önemli hale gelir. Bu çalışma Yemenlilerin demokrasiye yönelik siyasi tutumlarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Arap Parametre Araştırması 2018'in demokrasi ve demokrasiyle ilgili konular ile ruh sağlığıyla ilişkisine ilişkin sonuçları analiz edilmiştir. Mevcut araştırmada Yemenlilerin siyasete ilgisinin düşük olduğu ortaya çıktı. Ülkede yaşanan silahlı kutuplaşma durumuna rağmen Yemenlilerin demokrasiye yönelik tutumları genel olarak olumluydu. Araştırmaya katılanların yarısından fazlası demokrasinin en iyi yönetim sistemi olduğunu belirtti. Ayrıca sonuç, Yemenli erkeklerin kadınlara göre siyasetle daha fazla ilgilendiklerini ortaya çıkardı. Mevcut çalışma, Yemenlilerin demokrasiye yönelik tutumlarının ruh sağlığından etkilendiğini ortaya koydu. Depresyon ve stres etkenleri bireylerin demokrasiye yönelik tutumlarının olumsuz belirleyicileriydi.

Introduction

Yemen has a long history of political instability and authoritarian rule, both under the Zaydi Imams and later under the Saleh regime. The country's transition to democracy after the 2011 uprising was short-lived, as the Houthi rebellion and the subsequent intervention by Saudi Arabia and its allies plunged Yemen into a devastating civil war.

Although progress toward democratic reform in Yemen has been slow and halting, many Yemenis remain committed to democratic ideals and continue to advocate for greater political participation and accountability. Civil society groups, including women's rights organizations and youth movements, have been particularly active in promoting democratic reform and pushing back against authoritarian tendencies. However, there are also significant obstacles to democratic consolidation in Yemen.

The ongoing conflict has created a highly polarized political environment, with different factions vying for power and influence. The country's weak institutions, including its judiciary and electoral system, also pose significant challenges to the establishment of a stable and inclusive democracy.

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Article Type / Makale Türü

Research Article / Araştırma Makalesi

Keywords

Political Attitudes, Democracy, Mental Health, Stressors, Depression, Yemen.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Siyasi Tutumlar, Demokrasi, Ruh Sağlığı, Stres Etkenleri, Depresyon, Yemen.

JEL Codes: Y90

Submitted: 31 / 12 / 2023

Accepted: 26 / 06 / 2024

Also, the ongoing conflict in Yemen has had a significant impact on attitudes toward democracy. A report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace notes that the conflict has created a highly polarized political environment, with different factions vying for power and influence. This has led to a breakdown in trust between citizens and the state, as well as increased levels of political violence and repression.

1. Attitudes towards Democracy

The success of democracy depends on understanding, activism, and commitment of democratic values. Thus there should be active and informed participation of people at all levels of government as willing participants in defining and maintaining democracy (NOA, 2006). Citizens in Arab countries should be concerned with promoting an understanding of democratic ideals and ensuring that government policies truly represent the best interest of the people and not those of a handful of rulers (NERDC, 2005).

Citizens' attitudes towards democracy depend on their awareness and understanding of those concepts, and this has direct repercussions on democracy itself and the general political system. Quigley and Bahmueller (1991) define democratic values as "the fundamental beliefs and constitutional principles that guide government established in a given society." It is an ethic that regulates the extent, level, and participation of citizens in a democracy. Democracy is a system of government in which all adult citizens participate in making decisions that affect their lives. There are many elements that make up a democracy, including political freedom, freedom of speech, equal rights regardless of race, religion, or gender, separation of powers, and the rule of law. These values, in turn, are determined by the factors or interaction of the political culture, civic education or citizenship, and the political experiences of the society concerned.

2. The Democratic Experience in Yemen and Its Challenges

In 1990, the two parts of North and South Yemen were unified, and Yemen became one country. The ensuing years witnessed some political upheaval, but in 1999 the first elections in the country's history were held to contest the post of President of the Republic. After that, the country witnessed a number of electoral experiences in 2001, 2003, and 2006, whether for the election of the Parliament or local councils in the provinces. Despite all these experiences, a number of observers question the democratic electoral experience in Yemen.

The political and economic crises that have plagued Yemen over the past decade have had significant implications for the attitudes of Yemeni citizens toward democracy and its associated institutions. They evidence this by the political crisis in Yemen prior to the outbreak of the Arab Spring in early 2011. Following the 2011 uprising that led to the ousting of long-time president Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen embarked on a fragile democratic transition process. This included the establishment of a National Dialogue Conference aimed at drafting a new constitution and laying the groundwork for democratic governance (Ghobari, 2014). All of these indicators can lead to saying the fragility of the democratic experience in Yemen. This is due to the many challenges that stand in the way of democracy in Yemen, which include the following challenges:

- **Civil War:** The civil war broke out in Yemen in 2015, displacing millions of people and killing tens of thousands. The war also destroyed the country's infrastructure, which made it difficult to implement democratic reforms (Juneau, 2016). The chaos and violence of the civil war have eroded public trust in Yemen's democratic institutions and processes. Surveys conducted in recent years have shown that a majority of Yemenis express dissatisfaction with the performance of the government, parliament, and other state bodies (UNDP, 2019). This lack of confidence in the political system has led many citizens to become disillusioned with the idea of democracy itself.

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- **Inequality:** Yemen suffers from severe social and economic inequality, which creates fertile ground for conflicts. Inequality is attributed to poverty, unemployment, and discrimination based on gender and race.
 - **Foreign intervention:** The ongoing conflict in Yemen has drawn in a complex web of regional and international actors, each with their own strategic interests. The involvement of countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and the United States has further complicated the political landscape and shaped the attitudes of Yemenis toward democracy and its institutions (Juneau, 2016).
 - **Institutional Weakness:** Yemeni government institutions suffer from a significant weakness in the institutional structure, which makes it difficult to implement democratic reforms. Yemen also suffers from the problem of widespread corruption at various levels of government, and this weakens people's trust in the government. In addition to that, the weak efficiency of government institutions and the lack of transparency and accountability are factors that contribute to the weakness of democracy.
 - **Political Awareness:** Yemenis suffer from low levels of political awareness, which makes it difficult for them to participate in the democratic process. Yemenis are busy seeking a living because of extreme poverty and the severe humanitarian crisis in Yemen. As the political and security situation in Yemen has deteriorated, there are concerns that democratic values and norms are being eroded, both among political elites and the general public. Surveys indicate that support for core democratic principles like freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the peaceful transfer of power has declined in recent years (OECD, 2020).

These are just some of the challenges that stand in the way of democracy in Yemen.

3. Political Attitudes toward Democracy and Mental Health

The relationship between political attitudes and mental health is a complex and multifaceted issue, with significant implications for both individuals and societies. People's perceptions and beliefs about democracy and democratic institutions can shape and be shaped by their psychological well-being. Studies have shown that adherence to democratic values is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, subjective well-being, and overall mental health (Helliwell et al., 2019; Dolan et al., 2008). However, in many parts of the world, public trust in democratic institutions has been declining, with citizens expressing growing disillusionment and skepticism toward the political process (Foa & Mounk, 2016). This erosion of trust can have significant implications for mental health, as it can lead to a sense of powerlessness, hopelessness, and a lack of perceived control over one's life.

Political instability, such as that seen in countries undergoing democratic transitions or experiencing civil unrest, can also have a profound impact on mental health. Exposure to violence, displacement, and the breakdown of social support systems can contribute to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006).

The relationship between political attitudes and mental health is also shaped by sociocultural factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. For example, research has indicated that the impact of political instability on mental health may be more pronounced among marginalized or disadvantaged groups (Murthy & Lakshminarayana, 2006). Interestingly, some studies have suggested that active civic engagement, such as participation in political processes and community-based organizations, can have a positive impact on mental health by fostering a sense of belonging, purpose, and control (Caprara et al., 2009).

Addressing the complex interplay between political attitudes and mental health requires a multifaceted approach that takes into account the unique sociopolitical context and the diverse needs of individuals and communities. This may involve strengthening democratic institutions, improving access to mental health services, and fostering greater civic engagement and social

cohesion. Also, the relationship between political attitudes and mental health is a critical area of study, with significant implications for individual and societal well-being. By understanding the complex dynamics at play, policymakers, mental health professionals, and civic leaders can work together to create more inclusive, resilient, and mentally healthy communities.

4. Current Study

The prolonged political crisis in Yemen has taken a severe toll on the mental health of the population. Studies have found alarmingly high rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder among Yemenis, particularly those who have been directly exposed to violence and displacement (Alhasnawi et al., 2018; Shoib et al., 2021). The lack of access to quality healthcare and the breakdown of social support systems have exacerbated these mental health challenges. The attitudes of Yemenis toward democracy are complex and multifaceted, reflecting both a desire for political change and the significant obstacles that must be overcome to achieve it. The current paper attempts to study Yemenis' attitudes toward democracy and the values of political participation associated with it. In the current study, we analyze the opinions of Yemenis related to political attitudes toward democratic values. Also, we try to identify the effect of both gender and age on these attitudes. Finally, we examine whether these attitudes can be predicted by mental health variables.

4.1. The Significance of the Study

The current study gains its importance from the importance of the issue of democracy and political participation within the circumstances of the Arab and Yemeni democratic transition that we are currently living through, especially with the continuation of the war in Yemen for more than eight years. The current study is also the first study - according to the knowledge of the researcher - that deals with Yemenis' attitudes toward democracy. In addition, the timing of conducting the study is very important in light of the fact that the Houthi movement in northern Yemen and the Southern Transitional Council (CTS) in southern Yemen began to deviate from the democratic approach that Yemen has followed since the sixties of the last century.

4.2. Study Questions

The current study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the political attitudes of Yemenis towards democracy?
2. Is there any effect of gender and age on Yemenis' political attitudes toward democracy?
3. Can attitudes toward democracy be predicted by mental health variables?

Method

In order to answer the study's questions, the data collected in 2018 by the Arab Barometer survey from Yemeni citizens were used.

4.3. Participants

The Arab Barometer collected data from 2,400 participants from various Yemeni regions, including areas under the control of the Houthis and regions of the legitimate government. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-76 ($M = 63.34$, $SD = 14.33$), and 49.6% were male.

4.4. Instruments and Data Collection

A public opinion questionnaire was used to collect data from the participants through a personal interview with each participant. The questionnaire included various questions about the general situation of the country, such as the political situation, the economic situation, immigration, values, democracy, trust in the government, civic participation, the media, family relations, psychological well-being, and identity. In the current study, the focus was on questions related to attitudes towards democracy.

4.5. Result and Discussion

4.5.1. Political Attitudes toward Democracy

The interest of Yemenis in politics

When the participants were asked about their interest in politics and following up on political events in the country, the following answers were found:

Table 1. The Interest of Yemenis in Politics

Answers	n	%
I am not interested	822	34.3%
Little interested	749	31.2%
Interested	535	22.3%
Very interested	276	11.5%
Missing answers	18	0.8%

Although interest in politics is the key to accessing and developing democracy (Russo & Stattin, 2017), the current result indicates a low interest in politics among Yemenis in general. However, the Yemenis had clear opinions about democracy and its Features. This can be attributed to the preoccupation of most Yemenis with living and the requirements of daily life, which take up the bulk of their time and interests considering the war. The current result is somewhat similar to Abou Zeid's study (2008), which concluded that political disinclination among Egyptian youth was about 70%.

Democracy and the system of government

Participants were asked which statement is closest to their opinion of the following statements:

Table 2. Democracy and the System of Government

Answers	n	%
For someone like me, I don't care about the form or type of regime that governs the country	648	27.0%
In some situations, a non-democratic government can be the best	394	16.4%
Democracy is better than any other system of government	1285	53.5%
Missing answers	73	3.0%

It is clear from Table 2 that more than half of Yemenis (53%) believe that democracy is better than any other system of government, and this is due to the bad historical memory of Yemenis with non-democratic regimes, whether in the north or south.

Features of democracy

Participants were asked what the most important feature of democracy from their point of view is, and the answers were as follows:

Table 3. Features of Democracy

Answers	n	%
The government guarantees the enforcement of law and public order	853	35.5%
Freedom of the media to criticize the government	227	9.5%
The government guarantees job opportunities for all	522	21.8%

Multiple political parties compete fairly in free elections	727	30.3%
Missing answers	71	3.0%

From the perspective of Yemenis, the most important feature of democracy is the government's guarantee of law and public order. Followed by that the political parties compete in the elections in a fair manner. The reason for this could be the Yemenis' thirst for a democratic electoral experience. All previous experiences were questionable integrity by the Yemenis themselves. In addition, the international observers presented many irregularities related to the electoral system in Yemen. Also, this result reflects the extent to which Yemenis need the presence of the government and its institutions to play their role in applying the law and maintaining public order in the country.

Democracy and stability

The table 4. shows the results regarding the relationship between democracy and stability from Yemenis point of view. By examining the result, we can gain insights into the prevailing opinions, concerns, and attitudes towards democracy's impact on stability.

Table 4. Democracy and Stability

Statements	Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree		Missing answers	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
The democratic system is characterized as full of problems and indecisive	155	6.5%	480	20.0%	1141	47.5%	524	21.8%	100	4.2%
Democratic regimes are ineffective in maintaining system and stability	193	8.0%	441	18.4%	1042	43.4%	604	25.2%	120	5.0%
The democratic system may have problems, but it is better than others	620	25.8%	633	26.4%	670	27.9%	376	15.7%	101	4.2%

Most Yemenis believe that the democratic system enhances stability and development in the country. Also, they see that despite its problems, it is better than others. This is similar to the result of the previous question and leads us to confirm the Yemenis' need for a democratic system, which they lack from their point of view.

Is Yemen a democratic country?

The participants were asked about their opinion on whether they consider Yemen a democratic country or not. They were asked to give a value to the extent of democracy in Yemen on a scale from zero to ten, where the value of zero indicates that Yemen is not a democratic country and the degree of 10 means that Yemen is a very democratic country, and their answers were as follows:

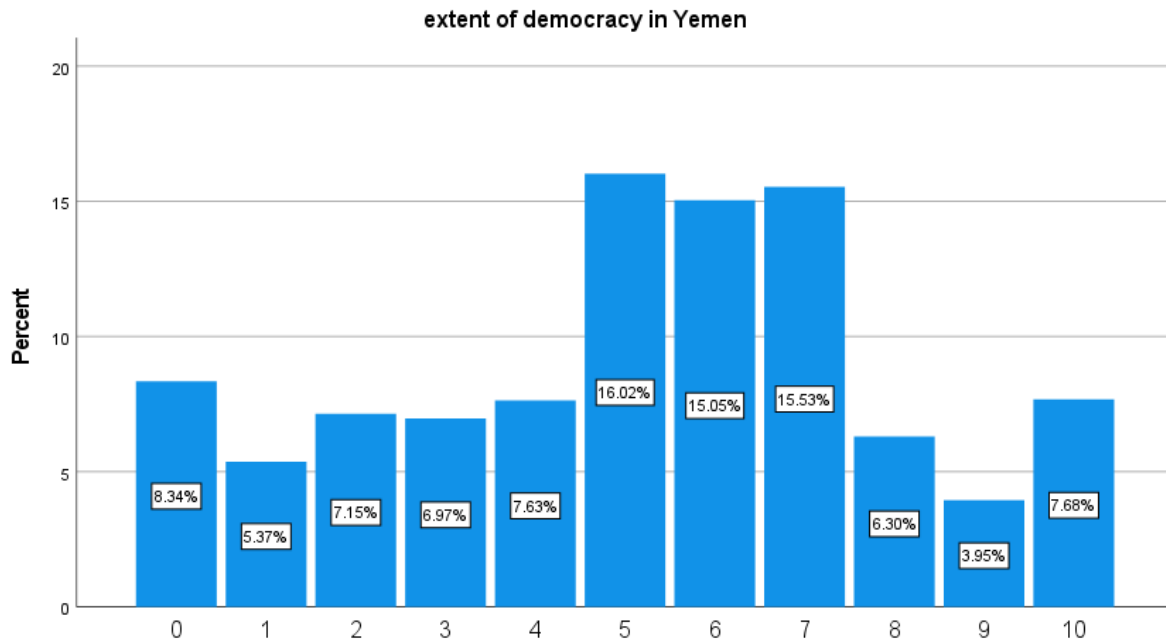


Figure 1. Is Yemen a Democratic Country?

The mean response of the participants to this question was 5.13 and $SD= 2.80$. This means that the participants believe that Yemen is a democratic country with an average percentage. This result seems relatively logical in Yemen. Despite the war and fragility of the state, people in Yemen can criticize the government and establish their civil activities without being subjected to harassment by the government.

Is democracy as system suitable for Yemen?

The participants were asked to express their opinion on whether democracy is appropriate for Yemen or not by giving a score on a scale from zero to ten, and the answers were as follows:

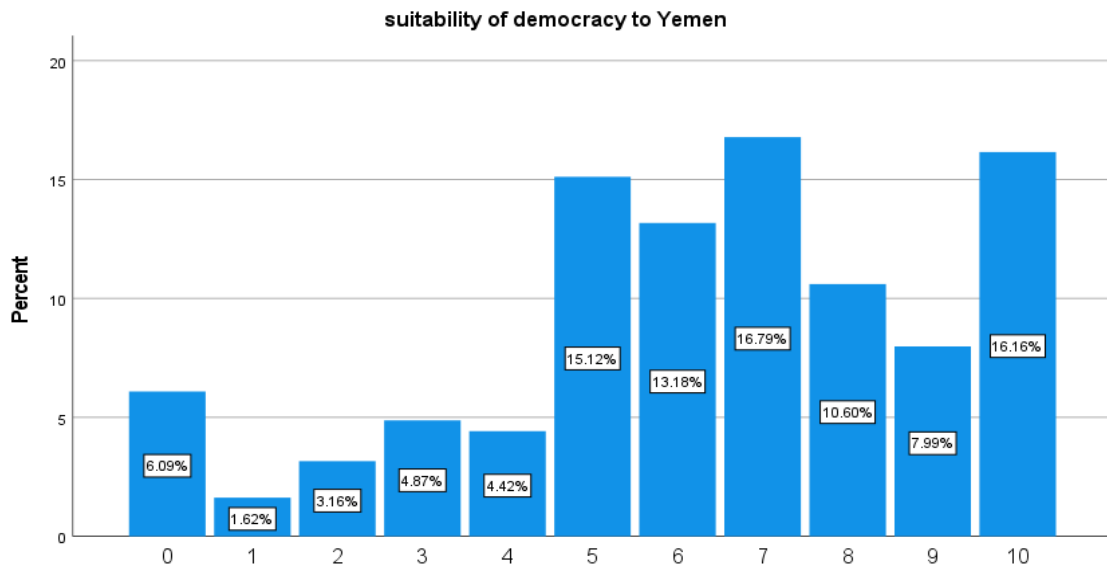


Figure 2. Suitability for the democratic system of Yemen

The mean of the answers to this question was 6.31, $SD=2.77$, which means that democracy is suitable for Yemen with an above-average degree from the point of view of the participants.

4.5.2. The Effect of Gender on Yemenis' Political Attitudes toward Democracy

In order to test the effect of gender on the political attitudes of Yemenis toward democracy, t-test was calculated.

Table 5. The Effect of Gender on Political Attitudes toward Democracy

Attitudes	Gender	M	SD	df	t	p
Interest in politics	Male	2.39	1.047	2349	14.017	<.001
	Female	1.83	.891			
Extent of democracy in Yemen	Male	5.17	2.886	2219	.590	.555
	Female	5.10	2.729			
Suitability of democracy to Yemen	Male	6.27	2.818	2182	-.491-	.555
	Female	6.33	2.733			

Table 5 shows that there are differences between males and females in their interest in politics. Yemeni males are more interested in politics than females. While there are no differences in the attitudes of Yemenis related to the suitability of democracy for Yemen and their evaluation of Yemen as a democratic country. This result is similar to the findings of Shockley (2016), who found that Qatari women are less interested in politics compared to males. This is due to the nature of Arab society, which is characterized by less participation of women in public life as well as in political life.

4.5.3. The Effect of Age on Yemenis' Political Attitudes toward Democracy

In order to test the effect of age on the political attitudes of Yemenis toward democracy, ANOVA was calculated.

Table 6. The Effect of Age on Yemenis' Political Attitudes toward Democracy

Variables		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Interest in politics	Between Groups	45.255	4	11.314	11.272	<.001
	Within Groups	2383.791	2375	1.004		
	Total	2429.047	2379			
Extent of democracy in Yemen	Between Groups	81.997	4	20.499	2.631	.033
	Within Groups	17504.570	2247	7.790		
	Total	17586.567	2251			
Suitability of democracy to Yemen	Between Groups	10.453	4	2.613	.340	.851
	Within Groups	16990.015	2210	7.688		
	Total	17000.468	2214			

The results show that there are differences in interest in politics and the extent to which Yemen is considered a democratic country due to the age of participants. While there are no differences in the suitability of democracy for Yemen due to the age of participants. The following figures show the pattern of these differences.

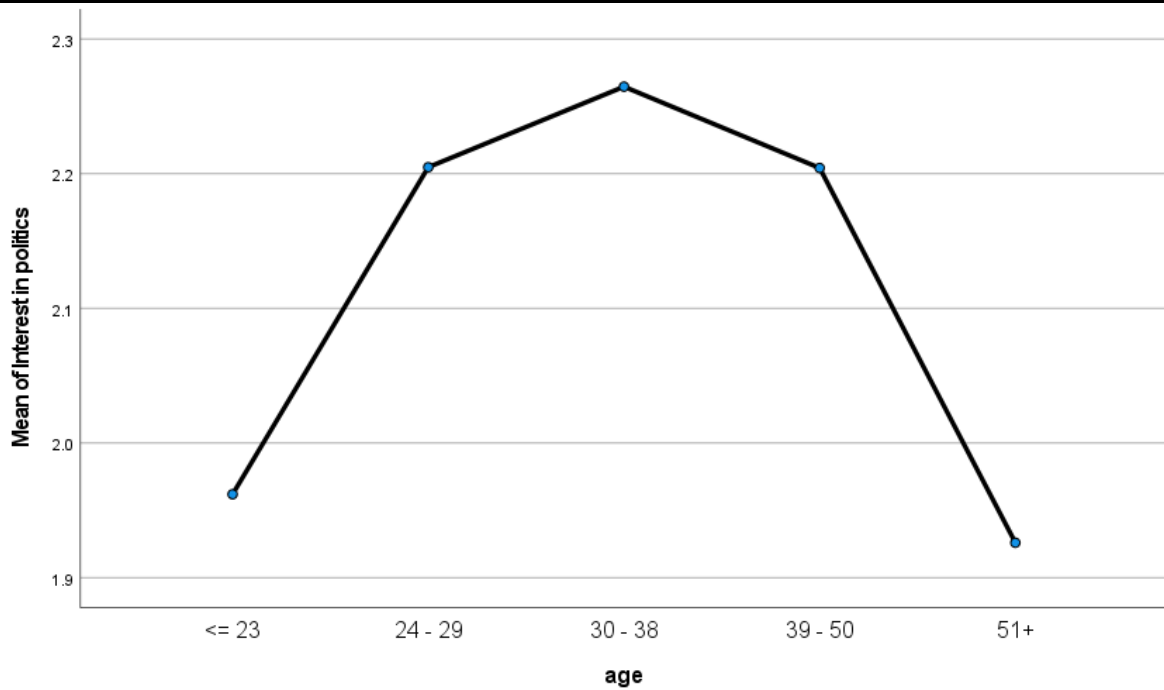


Figure 3. Yemenis Interest in Politics According to Age

Figure 3 shows that middle-aged Yemenis are more interested in politics than youth and elderlies. This result differs from the results of Holt et al. (2013) which concluded that interest in politics is more among young people, thereafter it becomes relatively stable.

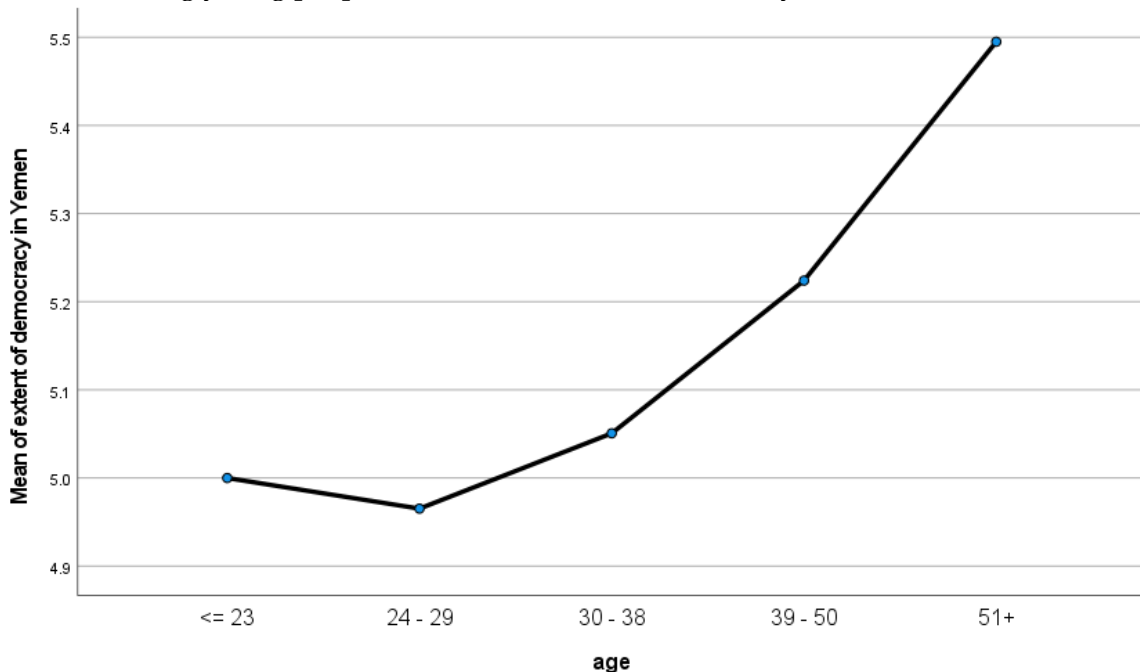


Figure 4. Considering Yemen a Democratic Country According to Age

It was found that the more Yemenis get older, the more they consider Yemen a democratic country. This result can be explained by the fact that the older people lived the experience of division before the Yemeni unity in 1990. That experience was dictatorial and non-democratic. So, they made mental comparisons between the current period and the previous period.

4.5.4. Predicting Political Attitudes toward Democracy

In order to predict political attitudes toward democracy from mental health variables, multiple linear regression using enter method was conducted. The result of regression in Table 7 indicated that the overall model was a statistically significant predictor of political attitudes toward democracy, $F(2,1088) = 15.372$, $p < 0.01$, $R^2 = 0.027$. Results show that there is a negative significant relationship between exposure to extreme stress and suitability of democracy to Yemen, $\beta = -0.087$, $t(1088) = -2.127$, $p < 0.05$. Also, there is a negative significant relationship between depression and suitability of democracy to Yemen, $\beta = -.094$, $t(1088) = -2.294$, $p < 0.05$.

Table 7. The Relationship between Attitudes toward Democracy and Predictor Variables

Predictor Variables	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)		34.632	<.001
Extreme stress	-.087-	-2.127-	.034
Depression	-.094-	-2.294-	.022

This means that the individual having depression or being subjected to extreme stress leads to the formation of negative attitudes towards democracy and saying democracy is not suitable for Yemen. This result seems consistent with the psychological literature on mental health and its association with political participation and the tendency toward democracy. For example, Landwehr and Ojeda (2021) found that depression inhibited interest in politics and participation in elections. This confirms the importance of psychological factors and their impact on political life and attitudes toward democracy.

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