



Youth Political Participation in Jordan between Political Knowledge Production and Practice

GenG - New Generation Program

Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Briefs Series

Policy Brief -1

Introduction

This policy brief addresses youth political participation in Jordan in connection with a critical analysis of the state of the art of Political Science in Jordanian academia and knowledge production in this sector. Looking at these two dimensions together is necessary to understand how knowledge production and action (theory and practice) interact in producing low youth political participation in the Jordanian context. The latter is often characterized by fragmentation and individual action.

The brief is an outcome of the Youth Civic and Political Participation

Policy Lab, organized by the Arab Renaissance and Democracy (ARDD) in partnership with the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, as part of the New Generation Program. It highlights the first session of the lab and what twenty participants from political science and law students from the University of Jordan discussed in this regard. Following the lab's work methodology, the session featured Prof. Zaid Eyyadat, Director of The Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan and was moderated by human rights expert Dr. Riyad Sobh.

The relationship between knowledge production and political participation

Modern Political Science mainly focuses on studying and analyzing policies, politics, international relations and organizations, and the dynamics between governments and non-governmental actors. In doing so, it has developed many approaches, which have served the evolution of academic theories and informed the action of political parties and local, national, and international organizations. A relevant example is the relationship between think tanks and political parties in all countries around the world, among which the U.S., where the knowledge produced by the first directly guides the policies and strategies of the latter.

The knowledge produced within Political Science, and the networks through which it is shared and spread, are therefore relevant in analyzing political action, participation, and forms of civic engagement. A critical understanding of the condition of Political Science as a discipline and its knowledge production in Jordan and the region is necessary to tackle the question of youth participation and involvement in the political and civic arena and to investigate its different forms, both manifest and latent. The question of participation is central to the pursuit and achievement of democracy and good governance.

The Role of universities in political and social sciences knowledge production

Political Science has been taught as a discipline at the University of Jordan in Amman since 1965. A department of Political Science was established at the University of Yarmouk (Irbid) in 1991/1992. Similarly, a department was founded at the University of Mu'tah (Karak) in 1994. These are three of the most prominent universities in Jordan, in the North, the capital, and the country's South. The time of establishing these Political Science courses and departments shows how **the discipline is relatively young in the Jordanian context**.

Considering the state of "Political Science" faculties in Jordanian universities and comparing them to the **numbers and trends in other contexts in the Arab region** provides an interesting indication of the **interconnected and complex issues that affect youth participation** in political and civil life in Jordan.

Challenges of studying political sciences according to the Policy Lab participants

1. Low number of students and faculties

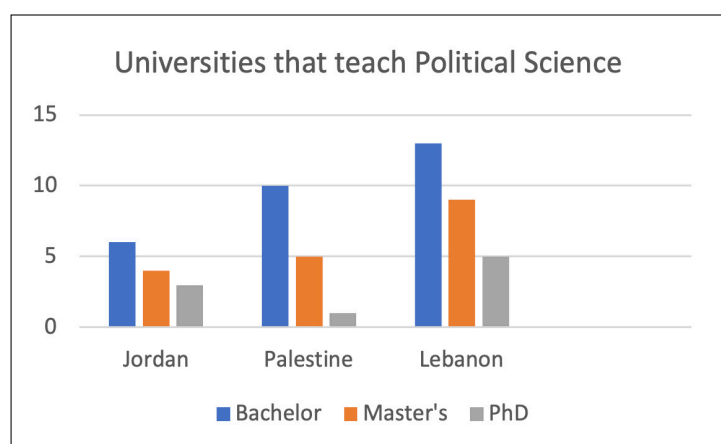


Figure 1 Universities that teach Political Science. Source: ARDD

The numbers provided by the Ministry of Higher Education indicate a **lack of interest in studying political science at universities compared to other majors**. For the second semester of 2021, the total number of Political Science students in all universities was 1,536 out of more than 330,000 students enrolled in undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs (715 females and 812 males). In the academic year 2022-2023, the total number of Political Science students decreased to 1,451, including 157 students of non-Jordanian nationalities. **Out of the 10 government universities, only 4 offer undergraduate programs in Political Science, 3 universities offer master's degree programs, and only 2 (the University of Jordan and Mu'tah University) offer doctoral programs. Out of 18 private universities, only 2 offer undergraduate programs in Political Science, and only one university offers a doctoral program.**

Compared to universities in **Lebanon** and the **Palestinian Territories**, these **numbers are low**. As Chart 1. illustrates, in Lebanon, 13 out of a total of 37 universities (one government and 36 private) offer undergraduate programs in Political Science, 9 offer master's degree programs, and 3 universities grant doctoral degrees. As for Palestine, 10 out of 21 universities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip offer undergraduate programs, 5 offer master's degree programs, and only one university offers a doctoral degree.

2. The social and economic perception for the study of Political Sciences

Political science students suffer from the **prevailing societal stereotypes**. Family and community members often dampen their enthusiasm to study this major with social and academic factors **making it unattractive or undesirable for high-achieving students**.

"I still hear people telling me that I should have studied medicine instead of political science. They say it's a waste of time. Many people tell me that political science won't put bread on the table."

- Political Science Student - Third Year.

"My high school GPA was 98.5%, and I entered political science out of choice. However, there is a stereotypical image that is hard to change. People often say that politics is a headache and lead only to problems. None of my friends or relatives encouraged me."

- Political Science Student - Third Year.

On the other hand, a significant group of political science students in Jordanian universities aspire to work in specific government ministries, such as the Interior and Foreign Ministries, and security agencies. However, in the face of **high indebtedness and economic deficits, the government seeks to reduce the number of public sector employees**, resulting in limited job prospects.

3. Low acceptance rates:

According to the Unified Admission System for Jordanian high school students, Political Science ranked among the lowest compared to other specializations. Scientific disciplines like medicine and engineering and other social disciplines like law tend to overshadow other majors, resulting in **majors with lower acceptance rates, such as political science, being available to academically weaker students**.

4. Outdated teaching methods and curricula

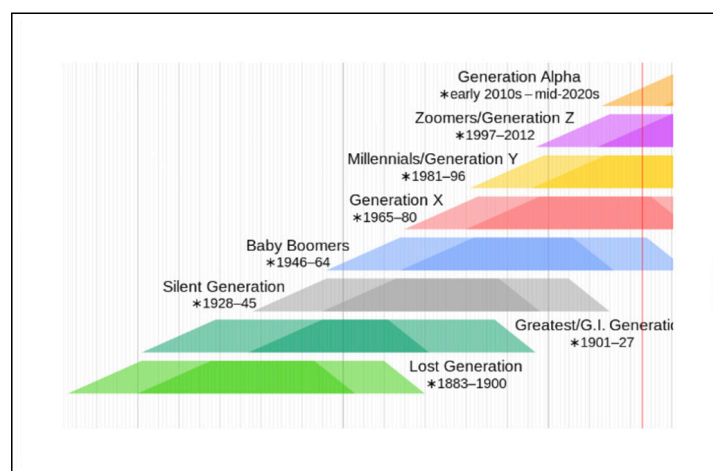


Figure 2 Generations. Source: Wikipedia on "Generation Z"

Modern teaching methods are moving towards **greater reliance on modern technology** and the policy of **open classrooms**, allowing students spaces for dialogue and discussion. Upon reviewing the curricula and study plans of Political Science departments in Jordan though, there is **significant similarity in the course materials** among universities, reflecting **repetition and a lack of a distinct scientific or intellectual identity**. A comparative study confirmed this, which highlighted that those **mandatory courses do not constitute a systematic or integrated theoretical curriculum**, and elective courses are **not harmonious** with each other, often reflecting the **personal interests of professional advancement of the professors** rather than students' or national needs.

The current generation of university students is part of what has been dubbed as **Generation Z**, or, colloquially, "Zoomers". What distinguishes this cohort (born between the end of the '90 and the 2010s) is that they are "**digital natives**" – they have had access to the Internet and to portable technology from a very young age. This does not necessarily make them "digitally literate", but it does affect them as technology has informed their ways of interacting very early on. The fast develop-

ment of technology has been affecting perceptions of age and generation, as well as understandings and practices of “adulthood” and “youth,” creating wider perceived gaps and differences between people born a few years apart. This increasing technological advancement and interconnection needs **to be taken into consideration to understand the forms of engagement, participation, and action that today’s youth resort to and move within.** The characteristics of Gen-Z and those of the earlier generation – Millennials (born between the 1980s and 1990s) – affect how they think and practice political participation and civic engagement in Jordan and the region. Youth often resort to social media platforms to express their ideas and opinions and to mobilize and organize on matters and questions that they deem as important to them.

Therefore, **focusing on these dimensions may allow political scientists to understand forms of political participation in Jordan in a broader way and observe alternative and diverse forms of political and social action.** This method of examining participation demonstrates that different forms of it may not always be apparent but can also be found in everyday practices that may seem “hidden.” **Political science in Jordan should develop a complex approach and perspective on political work, not restricting it solely to institutional and party activities.** Furthermore, it is **essential to develop and improve the teaching of Political Science in universities and knowledge production in this field** to provide young people with the tools, knowledge, and accurate information about political life, enabling them to develop their public roles and participate effectively and beneficially in their communities.

The role of research centers in the production of knowledge:

The number of research centers in Jordan dedicated to political studies and international affairs **is limited.** Most of these active centers are **not solely specialized in Politics** but encompass social, economic, and other areas within the funding conditions set by international organizations and the international community. **Therefore, the number of specialized centers or think tanks in Political Science does not exceed ten.**

When reviewing the published content of these centers concerning political affairs, it is found that they produce books, periodicals, studies, reports, and policy papers, most of which are available through their websites. However, **these research efforts may not significantly contribute to knowledge production in the field of political science, and there is not always a clear connection between them and specific intellectual orientations.** They often serve short-term, funded projects and focus only on current events.

In this sense, the number of research centers and specialized scientific journals in the field of political studies affairs in Jordan remains limited. **In contrast to the situation in Jordan, other contexts in the region are characterized by a more extensive and diverse knowledge production in political science.** For example, in Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza Strip), **there are more than twenty specialized centers in Politics and International Relations.** This can be attributed to the political circumstances affecting the Palestinian society and the ongoing occupation for over 75 years, as well as the diversity of political spectrums and parties from the right to the center and left.

In the current context, characterized by resource scarcity, the impact and effectiveness of research centers and think tanks are significantly diminished. **This has a negative impact on the political system, policy-making processes, and public awareness in Jordan. Think tanks typically play prominent roles in various contexts around the world by providing comprehensive information and analyses to the general public and to political leaders, including Parliament members and decision-makers,** regarding economic, political, and social developments within the country. Research centers also play an active role in shaping the foreign policies of major countries. Therefore, it is essential to address the shortage in the number and quality of such institutions in the Jordanian context.

Enhancing the role of these institutions in Jordan requires significant effort because they can be a catalyst for producing more politically aware and informed political figures, experts, and decision-makers who can better understand the political, social, and economic challenges facing Jordan and effectively deal with policies that affect society in various ways.

The role of journals and publications in the production of knowledge

There is also a scarcity of specialized journals in political science. While the Jordanian Journal of Law and Political Science, published by Mu’tah University, is considered the official scientific journal for political science in Jordan, other public universities do not publish political science articles in their journals regularly. When reviewing the last ten issues of the Jordanian Journal of Law and Political Science, political science articles accounted for only 19% of the total published articles, with the majority of the content focusing on legal issues instead.

The University of Applied Sciences publishes a peer-reviewed journal called the Jordanian Journal of Applied Sciences - Humanities Series, which contains several articles related to political science. As for the journal Dirasat, published by the Research and Graduate Studies Deanship at the University of Jordan since 1974 in print and since 2017 in digital format only, it specializes in social and human studies but also includes a small percentage of articles related to political science.

Overall, the number of scientific articles remains low in Arab countries. Recent reports indicate that in 2007, the number of Arabic scientific publications (around 15,000 papers) was equivalent to the scientific output of Brazil and South Korea in 1985. Furthermore, according to an ESCWA study in 2014, if the total number of faculty members in universities in the Arab region is considered around 180,000, in addition to 30,000 full-time researchers in specialized centers, the estimated academic and scientific community working in research and development in the Arab world is about 210,000 researchers. However, these specialized scientists produce only 5,000 academic articles annually, equivalent to 24 scientific papers per 1,000 full-time professors and researchers.

In this context, Jordan has witnessed significant changes in the field of scientific research. Despite the major focus on engineering and medicine, social sciences have also experienced noticeable development in the past twenty years. Despite the stagnation that characterizes the field of Political Science, the Jordanian context is currently undergoing several developments and dynamics that represent opportunities for real change. These include the launch of political and economic reform tracks (the Modernization Reform) in 2021, the increased role of civil society institutions in this regard, and broader efforts in building political parties. All of these factors combined can have a significant and positive impact on knowledge production in Political Science.

The contribution of political sciences in encouraging youth’s political and civic participation

The preliminary study conducted by ARDD in 2021 revealed that the majority of young people are still not active in the political field, a trend that has been confirmed by a recent study by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation in Jordan, titled ‘Youth in Jordan.’ The study sheds light on the youth’s lack of trust in public policies, government institutions, and their political participation. Several reasons contribute to this phenomenon, including the perception among youth that there is no role and space for them to engage and influence civil and political society.

On another note, **youth face multiple barriers to political and civic participation related to the limited opportunities to expand their political and social knowledge and capabilities** and their lack of trust in institutions such as political parties and civil society.

In this context, **the role of Political Science becomes crucial**, as it is a discipline that studies the relationship between policies and societies, as well as the interaction between civil society actors, governments, and policymakers at the local, national, and international levels. **Universities and research centers play a fundamental role in sharing knowledge on these matters and making it accessible to all.** These institutions provide individuals with advanced and extensive tools and knowledge that enable them to **pursue professional careers in the public sector and civil society that ultimately benefit their communities.** In particular, the study of Political Science opens up **specific career paths** for youth (such as careers in for-profit and non-profit organizations and in the public sector) that enable them to **assume leadership roles and responsibilities in their society.** Political science provides its students with the **knowledge and skills** required to work in fields such as law, journalism, international affairs, primary and secondary education, government agencies, and political offices, allowing them to bring about positive change in their societies through work in these various contexts and levels.

Redefining the understanding of political participation can enable this field of study to become a tool for achieving good governance and genuine participation in Jordanian local communities. Human rights, international relations, development theories, strategic studies, and policy management are all important and relevant fields within Political Science, as they enable **the creation of a “new generation” of young men and women capable of understanding and working within their reality through a comprehensive and in-depth perspective, connecting local, regional and international levels.**

The popularization of Political Science serves to empower political and societal work more broadly within Jordanian society. It contributes to **a collective education of citizens about forms of participation and their impact**, such as participation in elections, political parties, and institutions. Expanding **participation in political and civil society is considered the foundation for a vibrant democratic public life.**

Recommendations

To the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and Universities:

- Review the academic curricula and work on their development to include practical applications in the field of Political Science, making it more dynamic and interdisciplinary (with Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, etc.).
- Expand the inclusion of Political Science programs at various levels (bachelor's, master's, doctoral) in governmental and private universities.
- Qualify teaching staff with modern teaching methods, develop their understanding of Political Science according to the latest theories, and supply universities with a greater number of teaching faculty.
- Introduce Political Science classes into the school curricula for higher grades to enhance students' academic knowledge in the field.
- Establish partnerships with research institutions and civil society organizations to involve students in training and practical programs as part of the curriculum.
- Collaborate with prestigious Arab and international universities to enrich teaching staff and curricula with distinguished expertise.
- Support an increase in the number of specialized periodicals in Political Science and International Relations and increase allocations for scientific research.

To Research Centers:

- Focus more on Political Science research and related affairs by expanding academic and applied studies.
- Collaborate with universities and their teaching staff to conduct ongoing specialized research, and work on disseminating it to raise the level of scientific knowledge and political awareness of the public.
- Create political dialogue and guidance programs to enhance the competence of Political science students and increase their political experiences, in collaboration with local and foreign civil society organizations.

To civil society organizations and youth:

- Initiate and propose collaborations with research centers and universities where academic research and practical experience inform one another and allow for the exchange of knowledge and the development of original questions and frames.
- Make use of digital knowledge and skills, as well as technologies and media, to create spaces for youth to engage in fruitful discussions about politics and their societies.
- Create an environment capable of stimulating and deepening scientific production in the field of political science and benefiting from it.
- Provide insights and information for political science students and experts to enable analysis and study.
- Promote and strengthen grassroots initiatives that build collective awareness and action in society towards positive change. Top of Form

The Generation G (New Generation) project was launched within ARDD in 2021 with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands to energize and encourage youth leadership in promoting gender justice. The project aims to promote dialogue between youth and policymakers to influence policy relating to justice, particularly youth and women's rights.

Policy Labs are part of ARDD's research methodology, providing a dedicated space for discussing and researching public policy issues with the aim of enhancing the capacities of youth and equipping them with the necessary skills to engage in public policy-making processes. The labs also facilitate exchanging opinions with experts and researchers specialized in relevant topics, based on background papers prepared to address these issues.

Established in 2018, The Renaissance Strategic Center is an independent think tank based in Jordan that operates within the organizational framework of the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD).