



Democracy at Risk:

The Rise of Political Apathy in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

External Policy Brief to the Presidency of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

March 2026



POLICY BRIEF

1

THE INITIATIVE

This Policy Brief is part of an initiative led by the Sbey Research Center (SRC). The initiative contributes to policy debates by providing research-based analysis and forward-looking perspectives on governance, political participation, and social development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

The Sbey Research Center produces research and analysis on key political, social, and economic developments, including party dynamics, governance, human rights, and demographic change. Its work aims to support evidence-based policymaking and informed public discourse in the region. The Center's activities are organized around three main areas: research; policy analysis and advocacy; and public outreach. Within this framework, the Policy Briefs are designed to be concise and policy-oriented, focusing on identifying key drivers of specific challenges, outlining their implications, and proposing actionable recommendations.

THE POLICY BRIEFS

This Policy Brief is the first in a series of publications produced by the Sbey Research Center addressing current public issues in the Kurdistan Region and beyond. The series aims to contribute to ongoing policy discussions by offering structured analysis and practical insights into governance-related challenges.

This brief focuses on the growing challenge of political apathy in the Kurdistan Region, particularly among youth and the broader public. Rising distrust in institutions, declining electoral participation, and a widespread sense of political inefficacy risk weakening democratic representation, accountability, and institutional legitimacy, especially in contexts where democratic systems remain underdeveloped. This policy brief seeks to provide a structured understanding of political apathy and its implications for governance. It approaches the issue not merely as disengagement, but as a reflection of deeper structural conditions, including dissatisfaction with government performance, limited opportunities for meaningful participation, and a widening gap between citizens and political elites.

POLICY BRIEF 01

Authors: Ahang Habib Hawrami, M.A., Researcher, Sbey Research Center, and Dnya Muhammad, B.A., Head of Call Center, Sbey Research Center.

Editor: Janat Muhammed, B.A., Researcher, Sbey Research Center.

Supervisor: Meysam Moradi, M.A., Independent Researcher in International Politics.

Project Coordinator: Shanya Ari, M.A., Researcher, Sbey Research.

In a context of growing political disillusionment and civic disengagement, the importance of open dialogue and research-informed analysis remains clear. This policy brief, *Democracy at Risk: The Rise of Political Apathy in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, provides a working diagnosis of the factors shaping political disengagement and reflects on their implications for the democratic process. It builds on ongoing efforts to support constructive debate, strengthen civic engagement, and promote governance that is more responsive and accountable to the public.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Sbey Research Center acknowledges the contributions of Raber Talaat, Director of the Sbey Research Center; Kardo Rached, head of the Turkish Studies Unit at the Center, for reviewing this Policy Brief; and Renas H. Karim, coordinator at the Center, for their support. We also recognize public commentators, civil society actors, and citizens engaged in discussions on governance, civic participation, and democratic change in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Executive Summary

The deepening political apathy in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq reflects a structural crisis in governance and public trust. Over the past 12 years, prolonged political stagnation, salary delays, declining voter turnout, and weakening institutional credibility have significantly reduced civic engagement, with election participation dropping from 87.4% in 1992 to 71.93% in 2024. Public confidence has sharply eroded. 64% distrust the electoral process, 36% have no trust in institutions, and 41.3% lack confidence in the political process. These trends reveal a growing legitimacy gap that threatens democratic stability. The brief therefore calls for the immediate reactivation of Parliament and the formation of the tenth cabinet as a first step, the adoption of a regional constitution as a structural reform and a second yet major solution, and the launch of a law-backed national initiative to restore public trust and institutional accountability as a long-term project with further long-term goals.

“Why vote? Will it make medical care more affordable? Will it ensure the timely payment of salaries? The answer seems to be a clear “no.”

Key Notes:

1. The migration of critical voices reduces pressure for reform and leads to the gradual decay of the political system as the government faces no accountability.
2. The loss of political and social trust undermines essential social capital and forces people to retreat into family and tribal circles.
3. Political apathy leads to a state of anomie, marked by a breakdown of social norms and feelings of alienation from society.
4. International reports indicate that criminal activities are increasing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, including financial crimes, smuggling, and drug trafficking.

“I will not participate in elections. I haven’t for the past ten years; why would I? Will it make my salary arrive on time? Will it bring better services, cleaner water and air, or cheaper healthcare? I do not think so,” says Mohamed, a 60-year-old resident of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) who is disabled, having lost one eye, and receives a modest monthly salary of 150,000 IQD from the regional government. Mohamed is not alone. He represents one of the 812,662 people in the region who distrust the electoral process to the extent that they refrain from obtaining their biometric ID cards, and he is one of 6 million residents of the region who are living in a highly complex context

marked by security pressures, political paralysis, and financial crisis. Such disengagement risks weakening democratic foundations and fostering institutional fragility. As the Kurdistan Region operates within Iraq's federal framework, sustained erosion of legitimacy could expose it to constitutional and legal vulnerability. This policy brief therefore measures the level of political apathy, assesses its risks, and offers clear policy guidance to address it.

This widespread disengagement raises a critical question: what is this phenomenon called in the political landscape? Yakubu (2012) defines political apathy, describing it as citizens' indifference toward political activities such as elections, public opinion, and civic responsibilities. An apathetic individual shows little interest in the social and political issues of their country. At first glance, political apathy may seem limited to acts of voting or abstaining, but as Latif (2025) emphasizes, the issue extends far beyond the ballot box; it reflects broader discouragement from active political participation. Several other factors contribute to political apathy. Mills and Riesman argue that a perceived loss of influence, a lack of interest, and the distance from those in power foster alienation, political powerlessness, and discouragement, which in turn reinforce

apathy (Mahmud, 2022). Rosenberg adds that politics may fail to satisfy certain individual needs or even jeopardize them. He identifies three key drivers of political indifference: (1) individuals may avoid politics due to feelings of psychological deficiency or weakness, (2) societal and cultural pressures may deter political engagement, and (3) politics may simply fail to meet immediate personal requirements (Mahmud, 2022).

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq presents a particularly revealing case study for political apathy. Over the past decade, the region has faced prolonged political strain: six years without parliamentary elections, 12 years of budget cuts imposed by Iraq's central government, repeated civil service protests over salary delays, and ongoing rivalry between the two dominant parties (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). This period also encompassed the 2017 independence referendum and its aftermath, notably the events of October 16, 2017, and the withdrawal of Peshmerga forces from Kirkuk and other disputed territories. At the same time, the major opposition, the Goran Movement, faded, while new opposition parties such as Nawai New (New Generation Movement), Barai Gal (People's front), and Halwest (National Stance Movement)

emerged. Even after the KRI conducted parliamentary elections on October 20, 2024, six years after the previous vote on September 30, 2018, the Parliament remains largely inactive, and the formation of the 10th cabinet of the government has been subject to long delays. This has created a profound political and institutional vacuum, fostering widespread societal indifference toward politics. Consequently, the region faces a deadlock in its political, institutional, and social landscape. This environment of perceived inefficacy and disenchantment significantly heightens the risk of political apathy becoming deeply entrenched in KRI society.

“How can a government endowed with oil wealth and material abundance still leave its citizens waiting for their salaries?”

This assessment was conducted by Sbey Research (a policy making non-profit research center based in the KRI) for the policy brief using a quantitative methodology grounded in two primary datasets derived from two separate surveys. The first survey, conducted in March 2025 under the title “Public Trust & Political Stagnation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.” The second dataset originates from another survey

carried out by Sbey Research’s call center in July 2025, titled “Understanding Political Participation of Citizens in the Kurdistan Region.” The analysis relies on three categories of secondary data. The first concerns the percentage of electoral participation and non-participation in elections held in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq from 1992 to 2021. These figures are derived from Mohammed Rauf’s research, “Elections in Kurdistan 1992–2021: Comparative and Analytical Study,” and Kurdish Institute for Election’s data on the last parliament election of IKR in 2024. The second set of secondary data relates to the number of protests organized annually in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, drawn from the annual reports of Alliance 19 Network (2025), a watchdog group monitoring civil activities in the region.

The rationale for integrating these two principal categories of data is analytical complementarity, as each captures a distinct yet interrelated dimension of the broader equation. While one set of data traces the steady decline in electoral participation over time, the other illuminates the depth of public trust in the institutions and political parties that have governed the Kurdistan Regional Government for nearly thirty-five years. An additional dataset further examines citizens’

confidence in elections themselves, the normative cornerstone of democratic governance. Taken together, the synthesis of these indicators enables a comprehensive assessment of the scale and trajectory of political apathy in the region, forming the basis for evaluating its potential risks and articulating informed policy guidance to safeguard democratic stability. The datasets converge on a consistent and unequivocal conclusion: political engagement in the KRI has markedly declined across all measurable dimensions, including electoral participation, institutional trust, civic discourse, and confidence in political parties. The following sections systematically examine each of these areas of contraction in turn.

Decline in Electoral Engagement

Decline in Electoral Engagement Political apathy can be measured through electoral participation trends since 1992. Dean (1960) conceptualizes political apathy in terms of voting or not voting, while Dahl et al. (2017) frame it as a broader lack of political participation (Mahmud, 2022). On the basis of this academic logic, in the first parliamentary election of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, held on May 19, 1992, 87.4% of eligible voters participated, while only 12.6% did not. In the Jan 30, 2005 election,

participation decreased to 75.6%, with 24.4% abstaining. In the Jul 25, 2009 election, participation further declined to 74.5%, with 25.5 % not voting. Similarly, in the Sep 21, 2013 election, participation was 73.9%, while 26.1% did not vote despite having the right to do so. The decline became more pronounced in the Sep 30, 2018 election, where participation dropped to 59.8%, and 40.2% of eligible voters did not cast their ballots (Rauf, 2023). The 2018 election was the first in which biometric cards were mandatory for voting. Although there is no exact figure for how many people missed voting in Kurdistan region of Iraq due to not collecting their biometric cards, data from the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) of Iraq shows that in the same year about 7.7 million cards remained uncollected around all governorates of the country for election May 12, 2018 of Iraqi parliament election, out of 24.5 million eligible voters. (Chirillo & Roddey, 2019) & (IraqiNews, 2018). This was the first step of the emerge of different type of boycotting which appeared on not collecting the biometric cards. This trend continued in the last parliamentary election held on Oct 20, 2024, although the nature of non-participation continued due to legal and technical procedure which required voters

to possess biometric cards. The number of citizens eligible to vote in 2024 parliament election was 3,789,360. Of these, 2,899,061 registered in biometric card offices which makes 76.50%, among them 2,085,949 representing 71.93% cast their ballots, while 28% did not (Sabir, 2024). Among the ones who had right to vote and registered to get their biometric cards 812,662, which makes 21%, of those who not vote did not collect their biometric cards (Draw, 2025). The numbers show a shift in boycott, starting with not getting biometric cards, hinting at new ways people avoid elections which considered the core of democracy.

Protests without Participation

The continuation of the protests alongside the decline in electoral participation highlights a paradox. According to the annual report of Alliance 19 Network, only in 2025, there were 356 civil activities, including protests over salary delays, poor public services, human rights violations, demands for greater freedom of expression, women's rights, students' rights and services, and calls for employment and job opportunities (Alliance 19, 2026). In this context, the protests happened in a pattern that reflects fragmented and individualized channels of representation rather than civil validity.

Decline in Political and Institutional Trust

The findings of the two surveys show a fragile state of political and institutional conditions because, alongside declining participation, citizens' confidence in political institutions, Parliament, courts, and civil institutions is in a fragile state. The survey conducted by Sbey Research's Call Center, titled "Public Trust & Political Stagnation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq" (March 2025), based on 1,590 respondents across all governorates and various residential settings, demonstrates low levels of institutional trust. For example, **Figure (1) shows**, 41.3% of respondents do not trust any political party in the IKR to transform the region from political stagnation and ensure its stability. According to **Figure (2)**, 77.7% believe that political stagnation and delays in government formation have negatively affected their daily lives. Additionally, 39.6% stated that they were not optimistic that the 10th cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government would be formed before Newroz (Kurdish New Year: (March 21, 2025) which explained in **Figure (3)** (Sbey, 2025).

Further, evidence of declining trust appears in the July 2025 survey titled "Understanding Political Participation of Citizens in the

Kurdistan Region,” based on 1,512 interview samples. According to the findings showed in **Figure (4)**, 36% of respondents have no confidence in official institutions in the region, and **Figure (5)** 64% report that they do not trust the electoral process. Moreover, **Figure (6) shows** 94% state that they did not participate in demonstrations or any form of civil activity during the last year. **Figure (7) explains** that 51% indicate that they are not members of any political party and have no intention of becoming members. **Figure (8) shows** 76% report that they never post or share political content on social media, and **Figure (9)** reveals 46% do not engage in political discussions at home or with family members (Sbey, 2025).

Note: Please refer to pages 9 -11 for the figures.

Conclusion

The findings of the policy brief demonstrate that the deep frustration in the IKR is rooted in the gap between citizens’ sacrifices and the government’s shortcomings in delivering basic services. This fuels disillusionment and the risk of further political and social escalation, then leading to political apathy. In addition, the findings corroborate the core premises of Political Trust Theory, which examines the confidence citizens place in political institutions. The theory suggests that

election results and economic conditions significantly influence trust levels in formal institutions. The findings indicate that more than half of the population of the IKR lacks trust in the electoral process, and nearly half express no confidence in any political party. Furthermore, theoretical frameworks suggest that assessing both the level and trajectory of political trust offers essential insights into the stability of political systems. This perspective helps contextualize the current results, highlighting how diminished political trust may influence the resilience and sustainability of the IKR as a federal region within Iraq (Turper & Aarts, 2017). In conclusion, the analyzed data clearly demonstrate that public trust in political processes and institutions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is in rapid decline, while political apathy is becoming increasingly widespread. It is precisely this widening gap between citizens and institutions that this policy brief seeks to address.

From public apathy to institution paralysis: erosion of democratic resilience

If the situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq continues along its current trajectory, marked by persistent local political and economic crises, compounded by ongoing

security instability across Iraq and the Middle East, the region risks facing deeper institutional paralysis, including:

1. Erosion of democratic principles, because it undermines fundamental democratic pillars, specifically representation, participation, and accountability.
2. Low voter turnout diminishes the perceived legitimacy of electoral outcomes. This leads to a situation where elected officials may not truly reflect the will of the people.
3. Elite capture of institutions is another expected outcome, because when large segments of the population remain inactive, it creates an opening for a small, privileged minority to wield disproportionate influence over decision-making.
4. Weakening governance and accountability, as it leads decision-makers to feel less accountable to the electorate because participation is low.
5. Political apathy can lead to the implementation of policies that primarily serve the interests of the elite, thereby worsening socio-economic inequalities.

6. Hindered development; the pervasive culture of apathy prevents the realization of a vibrant, inclusive democratic system.
7. Creating apathy between political parties, because in the case of low participation, the parties will not care about public opinion, and this creates democratic erosion and leads to political populism.

Recommendations

- The immediate reactivation of the Kurdistan Region Parliament and the formation of the tenth cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government constitute an urgent institutional priority. Restoring parliamentary functionality is therefore not merely procedural; it is a foundational step toward fiscal stabilization, governmental accountability, and renewed democratic governance.
- Over the past 24 years, the Kurdistan Region has made four unsuccessful attempts to institutionalize its governance through a formal constitution. A 78-article draft approved in 2002 remained a project; a revised 122-article version in 2005

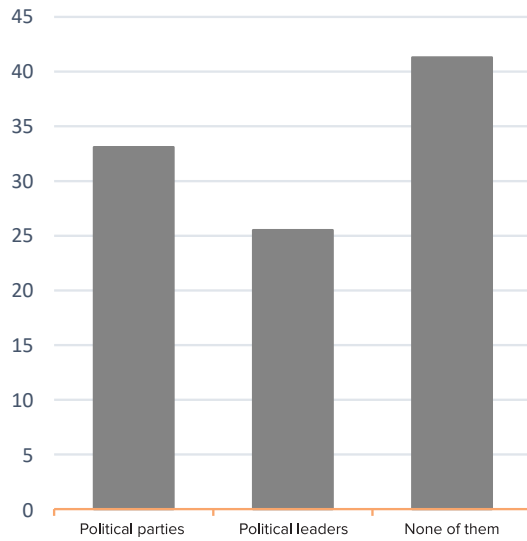
likewise failed to be enacted. In 2009, under Laws No. 8, 9, and 10 of 2009, Parliament approved a draft and requested a referendum (25 June 2009), yet the High Election Commission declined to proceed on 6 July 2009. In 2015, Law No. 4 established a 20-member parliamentary and legal committee, but the draft was not completed. A renewed process between 2019 and 2022 under Speaker Rewaz Fayaq also did not reach a conclusion. This prolonged constitutional vacuum has weakened institutionalization, rendered democracy fragile, and allowed governance to operate according to partisan interests rather than binding constitutional principles. So, rewriting the constitution will be the core of the solution to the problems of the region.

- To address the widening gap between institutions and citizens, this brief recommends launching a comprehensive national initiative, legally mandated by Parliament, aimed at rebuilding public trust. Political deadlock, fiscal instability, and incomplete institutional

development have collectively undermined confidence in governance. A law-based reform initiative, anchored in transparency, accountability, and participatory engagement, would signal a decisive shift toward rule-based administration and democratic consolidation in the IKR.

Figure 1

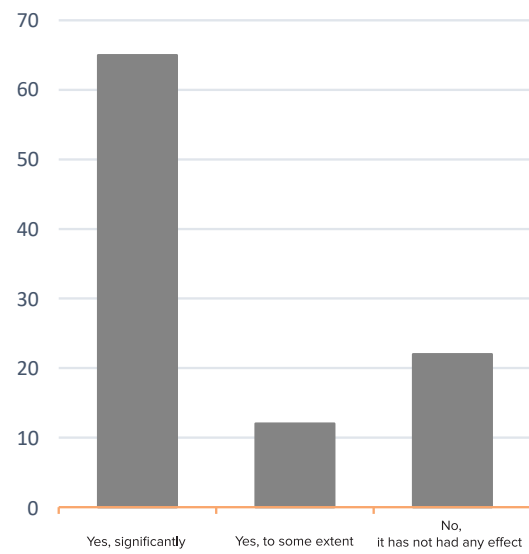
Which political party or political leader do you trust the most to overcome the current situation and resolve the ongoing conflicts?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

Figure 2

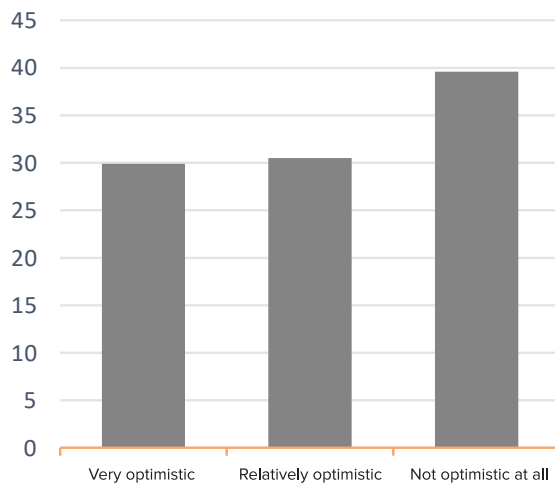
Have the political conflicts and the delay in forming the government cabinet affected your personal situation?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

Figure 3

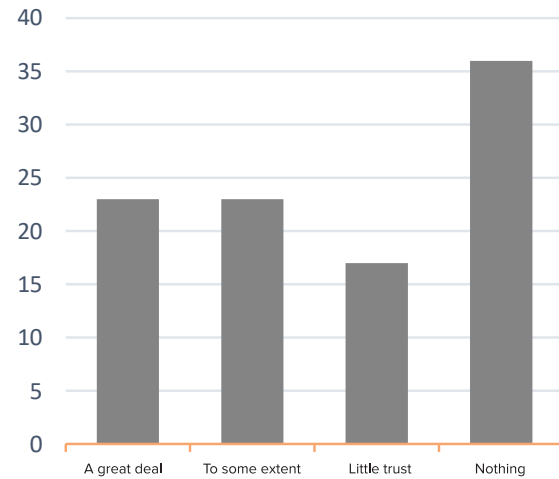
How optimistic are you about the formation of the new cabinet before Newroz this year?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

Figure 4

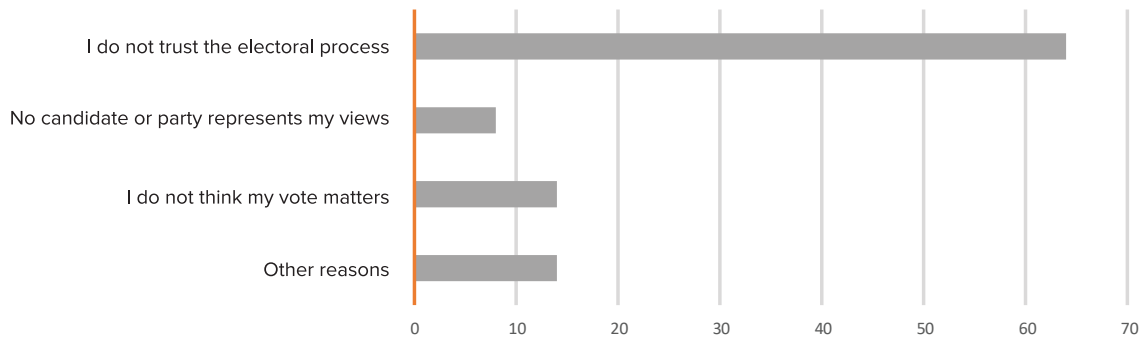
To what extent do you trust the following institutions: the Presidency, the Government, the Parliament, and the Judicial Council?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

Figure 5

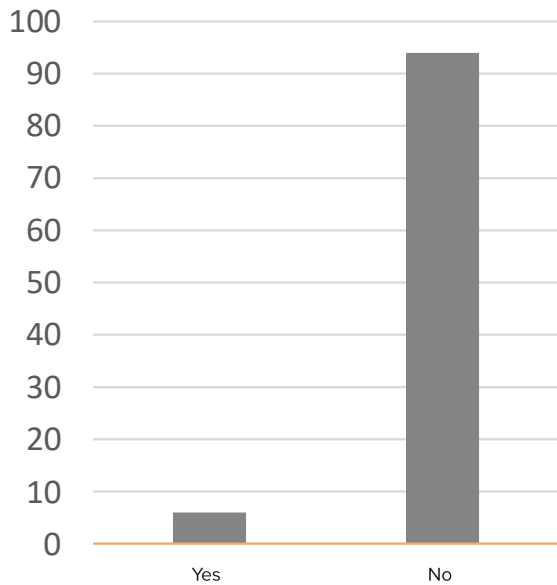
If you do not plan to participate in the elections, or are unsure whether you will participate, what is the main reason?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

Figure 6

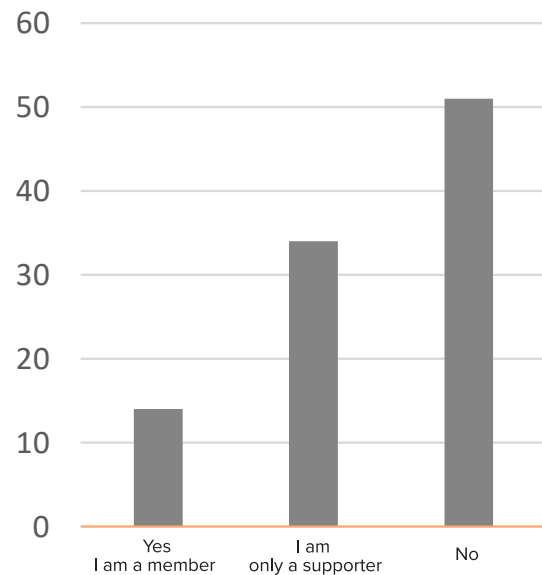
Have you participated in any demonstrations or civic activities in the past three years?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

Figure 7

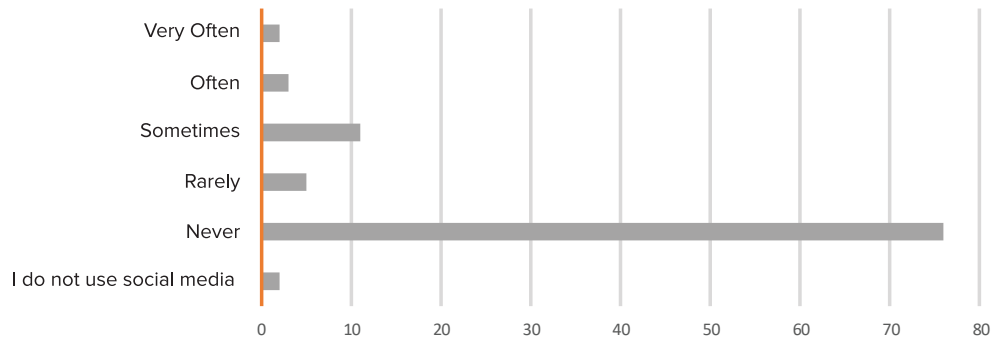
Are you a member or supporter of any political party or political organization?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

Figure 8

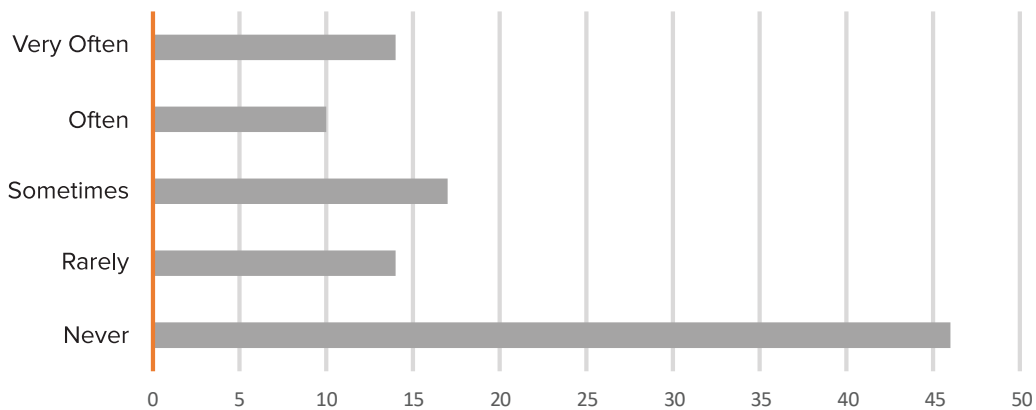
How often do you post or comment on political content on social media platforms (such as Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok)?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

Figure 9

How often do you have political discussions within your family?



Source of data: Sbey Research center-SRC (2025)

References

- Aram, J. Sabir (2024). An analysis of Kurdistan Parliament's sixth session Elections (Oct 10,2024). Kurdish Institute for Elections KIE.
- Chirillo, G., & Roddey, C. (2019, October). Gender analysis of Iraq's electoral and political process. International Foundation for Electoral Systems.
- Dahl, V., Amnå, E., Banaji, S., Landberg, M., Šerek, J., Ribeiro, N., Beilmann, M., Pavlopoulos, V., & Zani, B. (2017). Apathy or alienation? Political passivity among youths across eight European Union countries. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 15, 284- 301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2017.1404985>
- Draw media. (2025). The total number of individuals who did not register to obtain their biometric cards, thus missing the opportunity to vote in the 2024 Kurdistan Region parliamentary elections.<https://drawmedia.net/infographic/17299-ewanei-baiometrian-nekrdue>
- Hirschman, A. O. (1970). Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states. Harvard University Press. <https://share.google/FFAVxw7K8uQ2WtBQQ>
- International Organization for Migration. (2016). Migration flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons behind migration. IOM Iraq <https://iraq.iom.int/resources/migration-flows-iraq-europe>
- Kurdistan region parliament. (2022). History of constitution project in Kurdistan region of Iraq. <https://legislation.krd/constitution>
- Latifi, V. (2015). Factors Influencing Political Apathy: Comparative Context of the Political Culture and Apathy. *Bulgarian Historical Review*, 3-4, 193-211.
- Mahmud, M. H. (2022). The relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and political apathy. *Polish Psychological Bulletin*, 53(4).<https://doi.org/10.24425/ppb.2022.143373>
- NATO Strategic Direction South Hub, & Policy Center for the New South. (2021). The challenge of the youth bulge in Africa and the Middle East: Migration and the brain drain. NSD-S Hub. <https://share.google/w4H4VpM7R367VKX9X>
- Network 14. (2026). Annual Statistics of protests in the Kurdistan Region in. <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1HEHo9EcZU/>

- Rauf, M. (2023). Elections in Kurdistan 1992 - 2021, an analytical-comparative study, third edition.
- Rosenberg, M. (1951). The Meaning of Politics in Mass Society. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 15(1). Retrieved July 31, 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2745747>
- Sbey Research. (2025). Public Trust & Political Stagnation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
- Sbey Research. (2025). Understanding and Political Participation of Citizens in the Kurdistan Region. <https://sbeyresearch.com/researches/53>
- Srole, L. (1956). Social integration and certain corollaries: An exploratory study. *American Sociological Review*, 21(6), 709–716. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2088422>
- Turper, S., & Aarts, K. (2017). Political trust and sophistication: Taking measurement seriously. *Social Indicators Research*, 130(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-015-1182-4>
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2025). UNODC in Iraq snapshot 2024. UNODC Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa <https://www.unodc.org/middleeastandnorthafrica/en/index.html>
- Valadbigi, A., & Harutyunyan, B. (2012). Trust: The social virtues and the creation of prosperity by Francis Fukuyama. *Studies of Changing Societies: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Focus*, 1(1), 80–95. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/scs/v1i1/f_0026836_22565.pdf
- Yakubu, Y. A. (2012). Democracy and Political Apathy in Nigeria (1999-2012). *European Scientific Journal*, 8(20).