



How to cite this article:

Parhizgar, R., & Mohammadzadeh, S. (2024). Narratives of Electoral Disenfranchisement in Marginalized Populations. *Journal of Human Rights, Law, and Policy*, 2(3), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrhp.2.3.1>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 10 May 2024

Revision Date: 15 June 2024

Acceptance Date: 27 June 2024

Publication Date: 01 July 2024

Narratives of Electoral Disenfranchisement in Marginalized Populations

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of electoral disenfranchisement among marginalized populations in Tehran, focusing on how structural, psychological, and cultural mechanisms shape their exclusion from political participation. Adopting a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, this research involved semi-structured interviews with 17 participants from socioeconomically and politically marginalized communities in Tehran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation in gender, ethnicity, and residential status. Interviews were conducted in Persian and transcribed verbatim. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Thematic narrative analysis was employed to analyze the transcripts using NVivo 12 software. Codes were developed inductively and organized into themes and subthemes that captured the participants' perceptions and experiences of disenfranchisement. Three main themes emerged from the data: (1) Structural barriers to participation, including bureaucratic obstacles, geographic isolation, legal disqualification, and digital exclusion; (2) Psychological and social disengagement, such as fear of reprisal, political disillusionment, and community apathy; and (3) Resistance and agency, which encompassed informal political organizing, symbolic acts of voting, and peer civic education. Participants reported feeling both institutionally excluded and internally alienated, but many also demonstrated resilience and political creativity through alternative forms of engagement. Electoral disenfranchisement in marginalized populations is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by systemic exclusion, internalized marginality, and restricted civic infrastructure. Despite these barriers, individuals continue to assert political agency through informal and symbolic means. Policymakers must address both structural and psychosocial dimensions of exclusion to foster inclusive democratic participation and rebuild institutional trust in vulnerable communities.

Keywords: *Electoral disenfranchisement; marginalized populations; narrative inquiry; political exclusion; qualitative research; democratic participation; Iran.*

Introduction

Political participation is a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, reflecting the extent to which citizens can influence governance, express collective will, and hold institutions accountable (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995). Among the many mechanisms of participation, voting remains one of the most powerful tools available to citizens. Yet, the ideal of universal suffrage is often undermined in practice, particularly for individuals and communities situated on the margins of society. Electoral disenfranchisement—whether through formal legal restrictions, administrative obstacles, or subtle systemic exclusions—continues to impede the ability of marginalized populations



to exercise their political rights (López & Espino, 2017). This study aims to explore the lived narratives of such disenfranchisement, focusing on marginalized communities in Tehran, to better understand how systemic, psychological, and structural factors coalesce to inhibit political inclusion.

Marginalized populations are frequently subjected to multifaceted barriers that affect not only their access to voting but also their broader civic engagement. These barriers are not always overtly codified in law but are often embedded in institutional practices and social norms that reproduce exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989). For instance, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income individuals, formerly incarcerated persons, and migrants often encounter bureaucratic requirements that are more difficult for them to meet, including strict ID laws, limited polling locations, and complex registration processes (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021). These obstacles can be particularly acute in urban settings with layered social inequalities and fragmented governance, such as Tehran. Iran's urban poor, internally displaced persons, and ethnic minorities are often rendered invisible within official electoral mechanisms, mirroring global trends where marginalization and disenfranchisement are mutually reinforcing (Howard, 2017).

While many studies have focused on the legal or procedural dimensions of voter exclusion, there remains a significant gap in understanding how individuals experience and make sense of their political marginalization. Qualitative inquiry, particularly narrative methods, offers a critical lens to explore the subjective and symbolic dimensions of disenfranchisement. Narratives reveal not just what happens, but how individuals interpret and internalize their experiences, and how these meanings shape future engagement with democratic institutions (Riessman, 2008). For example, research has shown that perceived unfairness, fear of retaliation, and lack of institutional trust can lead individuals to self-select out of electoral participation, even when they are formally eligible to vote (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). These findings underscore the need to attend to the emotional, historical, and cultural contours of electoral disengagement, which quantitative measures alone may fail to capture.

The issue of disenfranchisement is further compounded by the growing digitalization of electoral infrastructure. While digital tools promise efficiency and broader access, they also risk excluding those without digital literacy or stable internet access—disproportionately affecting the poor, elderly, and those in informal settlements (Tufekci, 2015). In Iran, the increasing reliance on online registration and digital ID verification has intensified these inequalities, given that large swaths of the population lack access to secure or private internet connections. This “digital divide” serves as a contemporary iteration of exclusion, wherein access to the vote is conditioned not only on legal status but also on technological capacity (Norris, 2001).

The Iranian context also presents unique sociopolitical dynamics that shape the experiences of marginalized voters. Although the country maintains formal electoral institutions and periodic elections, the credibility of these mechanisms has been questioned due to perceived constraints on political pluralism and systemic bias in candidate vetting processes (Vakil, 2018). These structural limitations intersect with social hierarchies based on ethnicity, gender, class, and religiosity, producing a layered terrain of disenfranchisement. For example, ethnic minorities such as Kurds, Baluchis, and Arabs often report discriminatory treatment at the hands of electoral authorities, including being left off registration rolls or facing excessive scrutiny during voting procedures (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Similarly, those residing in Tehran's informal urban peripheries frequently lack access to polling stations or the bureaucratic documentation required for registration (Bayat, 2010). Such conditions contribute to what scholars term “everyday disenfranchisement”—the routine denial of political voice that becomes normalized over time (Cruikshank, 1999).

Moreover, psychological and emotional dimensions of disenfranchisement should not be overlooked. Research in political psychology has shown that repeated experiences of exclusion can foster political alienation, learned helplessness, and disengagement (Foster, 1981). Individuals may come to believe that their vote has no impact, or that participation is futile in a system perceived as unjust or unresponsive. This internalization of marginalization is particularly damaging, as it not only suppresses turnout but also limits broader civic imagination and agency (Fraser, 2008). In contexts marked by authoritarian governance or restricted civil liberties, such internalization may be further exacerbated by fear of surveillance, retaliation, or social ostracization. For instance, studies in Iran and similar political environments have shown that fear of being monitored during elections can deter individuals from even approaching polling places, especially if they are known to hold oppositional views (Alaaldin, 2021).

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that disenfranchisement is not merely a matter of individual disinterest or ignorance, but rather the outcome of complex structural, social, and affective dynamics. It is therefore essential to move beyond deficit-based explanations that blame marginalized individuals for low voter turnout. Instead, attention must be directed at the relational and institutional forces that shape who gets to be a political subject and under what conditions. This requires methodologies capable of capturing not only the occurrence of disenfranchisement but also its experiential textures.

This study addresses this gap by using semi-structured narrative interviews with 17 participants from marginalized communities in Tehran. Drawing on principles of thematic narrative analysis, the research seeks to identify the key themes and subthemes in participants' lived experiences of electoral exclusion. The participants come from diverse socio-demographic backgrounds but share a common experience of being structurally or socially disenfranchised. By focusing on their narratives, this research seeks to answer the following questions: How do marginalized individuals in Tehran experience and interpret electoral disenfranchisement? What structural, psychological, and cultural mechanisms contribute to their exclusion? And what forms of resistance or alternative political expression emerge in response?

Ultimately, this research contributes to a growing body of literature that seeks to reconceptualize democratic participation from the margins. It highlights the voices of those often excluded from official democratic narratives and emphasizes the importance of subjective experiences in understanding broader patterns of political inequality. In doing so, it also calls for more inclusive policies, culturally sensitive electoral outreach, and the dismantling of institutional barriers that continue to silence large segments of the population. The insights from this study can inform not only electoral reforms in Iran but also broader discussions on political inclusion, human rights, and social justice in similarly situated societies.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in narrative inquiry, aimed at exploring the lived experiences and personal accounts of electoral disenfranchisement among marginalized populations. Narrative inquiry is particularly well-suited for capturing the nuanced, context-dependent, and subjective experiences of individuals who have encountered systemic barriers to political participation. The participants were purposefully selected from marginalized communities residing in Tehran, ensuring variation in age, gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnic backgrounds to enhance the richness of the data. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adults (18 years or older), self-identify as politically marginalized or underrepresented, and have prior experience attempting to engage with the electoral system. A total of 17 participants (9 women and 8 men) were interviewed.

Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new significant themes emerged during the final interviews.

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, designed to elicit personal narratives related to participants' experiences with electoral processes, including voter registration, ballot access, intimidation, exclusion, and perceptions of institutional trust. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions such as: "Can you describe a time when you tried to participate in an election but felt excluded?" and "How do you interpret the reasons for your disenfranchisement?" Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in Persian by the primary researcher in private community spaces that ensured confidentiality and comfort for participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Thematic narrative analysis was employed to interpret the data, focusing on the structure, content, and meaning of participants' stories. Transcripts were first read multiple times for immersion, followed by open coding to identify significant events, emotional tones, and recurring patterns. Codes were then organized into broader themes that reflected shared experiences of disenfranchisement. NVivo 12 software was used to manage and categorize the data efficiently, facilitating systematic coding, thematic mapping, and retrieval of textual evidence. Throughout the analysis, attention was given to both the commonalities and divergences in participants' narratives, as well as how their experiences were shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, poverty, and institutional alienation.

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, strategies including member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail were employed. Member checking involved sharing synthesized findings with a subset of participants to validate interpretations, while peer debriefing with two external qualitative researchers helped mitigate interpretive bias. The research adhered to ethical standards of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, with ethical approval obtained from the institutional review board prior to data collection.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Structural Barriers to Participation

Bureaucratic Obstacles.

Many participants identified bureaucratic hurdles as a primary factor in their electoral exclusion. Recurrent issues included the lack of a national ID, loss of registration documents, and inaccessibility of voter registration offices. For some, outdated voter rolls invalidated their eligibility. One respondent noted, "I went to register, but they told me I was not in the system—how is that my fault?" These systemic inefficiencies disproportionately affect those already on the margins of the bureaucratic apparatus.

Legal Disqualification.

Legal ambiguities and restrictive laws were another major source of disenfranchisement. Individuals with criminal records, unclear residency status, or incomplete paperwork were often disqualified without proper explanation. Several participants mentioned being barred due to past infractions that had no relevance to their voting rights. One participant recounted, "They said my old court case from years ago made me ineligible. I had no idea." This reveals how arbitrary enforcement of legal standards perpetuates political exclusion.

Discriminatory Policy Enforcement.

Many narratives pointed to ethnic profiling, selective application of rules, and bias in voter eligibility assessments. Participants from ethnic minority backgrounds expressed that they felt targeted. A Kurdish participant stated, "They

look at your name and say you're not on the list, even when you are. It's not a coincidence." These experiences indicate how formal mechanisms are used in informally discriminatory ways.

Geographic Isolation.

Access to polling stations was frequently compromised for participants living in remote or informal settlements. They cited long travel distances, lack of transportation, and no outreach or awareness campaigns in their neighborhoods. One participant explained, "The voting station is two hours away by bus. No one here has time or money for that." This logistical barrier structurally excludes entire communities from participating in elections.

Institutional Apathy.

Participants expressed frustration with the lack of responsiveness from electoral institutions. Complaints went unanswered, and requests for clarification were ignored. A participant shared, "I wrote to the election office three times. No one replied. It's like they don't care if we vote or not." This perceived indifference reflects institutional disengagement, further undermining trust and motivation.

Digital Divide.

Increased digitization of voter services was experienced as exclusionary by those without access to technology. Participants reported lack of internet, difficulty navigating websites, and reliance on third parties. One individual said, "They say do it online, but I don't even have a smartphone. Am I supposed to buy one just to vote?" The push toward e-governance risks widening digital inequality in democratic access.

Theme 2: Psychological and Social Disengagement

Fear of Reprisal.

Several participants expressed reluctance to engage in elections due to fear of surveillance, political labeling, or intimidation by authorities. This fear was particularly acute among those who had previously participated in protests or activism. As one participant noted, "If they see me at the voting station, who knows what will happen next?" Such anticipated retaliation leads to voluntary withdrawal from the political process.

Disillusionment with the System.

Disenchantment with electoral outcomes and beliefs in rigged processes were widespread. Many voiced the sentiment that "my vote doesn't matter" due to pre-determined results. One interviewee stated, "We vote, but nothing changes. It's just a show for them." This deep cynicism significantly erodes civic engagement.

Lack of Political Education.

Participants revealed limited understanding of electoral procedures, civic rights, and voter responsibilities. This was largely attributed to educational gaps and lack of outreach programs. One respondent shared, "I didn't know I had to register before the deadline. No one told me." Such informational exclusion serves as a barrier to effective participation.

Internalized Marginalization.

Feelings of unworthiness, shame, and self-exclusion permeated the accounts of some individuals. These participants believed they were not the "kind of people" who get to vote. A poignant statement came from one respondent who said, "Voting is for citizens. I don't feel like one." This reveals how psychological alienation undermines civic identity.

Intergenerational Distrust.

Family histories of political disappointment or state betrayal contributed to long-standing disinterest in electoral participation. Participants explained that parents never voted, and election stories at home were filled with cynicism.

As one participant put it, “My father always said voting is for fools. I grew up believing that.” This demonstrates how historical exclusion can become culturally entrenched.

Media-Induced Cynicism.

Exposure to biased or politicized media led to increased skepticism about electoral integrity. Participants mentioned negative portrayals, partisan news, and lack of reliable information. One participant observed, “Every channel says something different. Who do you trust?” Such media confusion reinforces withdrawal from formal political processes.

Community Apathy.

Participants described a general sense of collective disinterest in their communities. In many neighborhoods, no one voted, and social pressure discouraged political conversation. A young man stated, “No one in my street even talks about voting. If you do, they laugh at you.” This peer-enforced apathy normalizes disengagement.

Theme 3: Resistance and Agency

Alternative Political Expression.

Despite exclusion, participants described engaging in non-electoral political activities such as protests, online campaigns, and symbolic resistance acts. A female participant shared, “I may not vote, but I march. That’s how I raise my voice.” These actions represent forms of agency outside institutional pathways.

Informal Organizing.

Some individuals reported participation in grassroots advocacy, community-based mobilization, or local dialogue circles. These efforts aimed to build collective awareness and negotiate with authorities on other civic issues. One interviewee noted, “We formed a group to push for clean water. That’s our way of being political.” This illustrates informal civic resilience.

Reclaiming Identity Through Voting.

For a few participants, voting was a deeply personal act of resistance. Despite structural barriers, they saw the act as reclaiming visibility and affirming their citizenship. As one participant put it, “I stood in line for hours because this is my country too.” Voting, in this case, was a symbolic restoration of dignity.

Educating Others.

Some participants became peer educators, helping friends and neighbors understand the registration process, legal rights, and ballot use. One shared, “I told my cousin how to register online. No one teaches us these things unless we teach each other.” This reflects a bottom-up dissemination of civic knowledge.

Seeking Legal Remedies.

A number of participants actively pursued complaints, legal action, or contacted rights-based organizations to challenge their exclusion. One person described, “I went to the election commission office and demanded a written explanation. They didn’t expect that.” This demonstrates proactive resistance within the system.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of electoral disenfranchisement among marginalized populations in Tehran through a narrative inquiry framework. The thematic analysis identified three core dimensions of disenfranchisement: structural barriers to participation, psychological and social disengagement, and resistance and agency. These themes and their subcategories reveal a complex web of exclusion that is both institutionally orchestrated and internally reinforced, highlighting the multidimensional nature of democratic marginalization.

The first theme, structural barriers, encompassed bureaucratic dysfunction, discriminatory enforcement, legal disqualification, geographic inaccessibility, institutional apathy, and digital exclusion. Participants detailed how seemingly neutral administrative systems produced outcomes that disproportionately affected them. These findings align with studies demonstrating that procedural obstacles—such as lack of ID documents, complex registration rules, and limited polling infrastructure—act as *de facto* disenfranchisement tools for vulnerable populations (Brennan Center for Justice, 2021; López & Espino, 2017). In the Iranian context, such barriers are amplified by the politicized nature of civil documentation, as citizens from ethnic or undocumented groups often lack the legal recognition necessary to engage with state institutions, including electoral bodies (Human Rights Watch, 2017). This not only undermines their ability to vote but reinforces a broader exclusion from political recognition and representation.

A notable finding in this domain was the digital divide, which emerged as a contemporary barrier to democratic participation. Participants noted that recent digitization of voter registration and communication mechanisms disproportionately excluded those without smartphones, internet literacy, or digital infrastructure. This mirrors global concerns that e-governance reforms, while intended to enhance efficiency, may unintentionally exacerbate inequality by privileging digitally connected citizens (Norris, 2001; Tufekci, 2015). In societies like Iran, where internet censorship, surveillance, and inequality in access persist, the digitization of voting systems risks entrenching existing disparities unless accompanied by equitable infrastructure development and digital literacy initiatives.

The second theme, psychological and social disengagement, highlighted how experiences of disenfranchisement extend beyond institutional encounters to shape individuals' perceptions of politics, self-worth, and belonging. Participants described deep-seated feelings of futility, fear, and alienation that discouraged engagement. Many internalized narratives of political inefficacy, often inherited from parents or community norms, leading to intergenerational disillusionment. This resonates with political psychology literature, which documents how exclusionary practices can foster learned helplessness, whereby individuals cease political participation due to a belief that their actions have no impact (Foster, 1981; Lerman & Weaver, 2014). Such internalized marginalization not only suppresses voter turnout but also limits the development of democratic consciousness and civic agency.

One particularly salient aspect of this theme was fear of reprisal, as several participants expressed concern that political participation might expose them to state surveillance or retaliation. In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, such as Iran, where political pluralism is restricted and electoral processes are tightly monitored, this fear is not unfounded (Vakil, 2018; Alaaldin, 2021). Studies have shown that perceived risks associated with voting can lead to self-censorship and voluntary abstention, particularly among individuals with oppositional views or those from minority backgrounds (Howard, 2017). In this sense, disenfranchisement is not merely a consequence of formal exclusion but also of an environment that fosters distrust and penalizes dissent.

The subtheme of community apathy further underscores the role of collective experience in shaping individual political behavior. Several participants noted that in their neighborhoods, voting was viewed as irrelevant or even foolish, with prevailing norms discouraging civic participation. This aligns with research on political culture and “civic deserts,” where long-term systemic exclusion erodes the social norms that sustain democratic engagement (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Howard, 2017). In such settings, political silence becomes a survival strategy, and civic inactivity a form of conformity.

The final theme, resistance and agency, complicates the narrative of victimhood by highlighting how disenfranchised individuals find alternative modes of political expression. Participants engaged in informal organizing, peer education, legal challenges, and symbolic acts of resistance such as voting despite intimidation. These accounts support scholarship that views disenfranchisement not as the end of political life, but as the impetus for alternative civic action (Bayat, 2010; Fraser, 2008). Especially noteworthy was the emergence of informal organizing, where participants created local advocacy groups or informal councils to address community issues and spread political awareness. These findings resonate with Bayat's (2010) concept of "quiet encroachment," wherein ordinary individuals assert their agency through localized and non-institutionalized forms of resistance.

The narratives also demonstrate how voting, when undertaken despite adversity, can become a symbolic reclamation of identity. For some participants, the act of voting—regardless of the outcome—represented an assertion of visibility and dignity. This reflects Fraser's (2008) argument that political participation is not only instrumental but also expressive, serving as a means of claiming one's place in the polity. Even in environments where electoral integrity is questioned, the decision to vote can be a deeply personal statement of belonging and resistance.

Overall, the findings of this study support a growing consensus in democratic theory that formal inclusion is insufficient without substantive accessibility and that disenfranchisement is as much about cultural and psychological exclusion as it is about legal or procedural barriers (Crenshaw, 1989; Riessman, 2008). The Iranian case offers a particularly rich site for exploring these dynamics due to its hybrid political structure, wherein formal democratic mechanisms coexist with significant authoritarian constraints. While such a configuration is not unique to Iran, the context-specific insights provided by this study enrich broader theoretical and empirical discussions on democratic participation in restrictive or transitioning regimes.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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