



How to cite this article:

Nazarpour, S., Bahmani, N., & Karampour, F. (2024). The Role of Law in Shaping Youth Political Engagement: A Case Study Approach. *Journal of Human Rights, Law, and Policy*, 2(3), 19-27. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrp.2.3.3>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 08 May 2024

Revision Date: 11 June 2024

Acceptance Date: 23 June 2024

Publication Date: 01 July 2024

The Role of Law in Shaping Youth Political Engagement: A Case Study Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how legal frameworks influence the perceptions, strategies, and behaviors of youth regarding political engagement in Tehran, Iran. This qualitative research employed a case study approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 20 participants aged 18–30 residing in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in political orientation, civic involvement, and legal awareness. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using NVivo software. Thematic analysis was conducted through an iterative coding process, including open, axial, and selective coding, to identify patterns and categories within participants' experiences. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and anonymity, were rigorously maintained. Analysis revealed four main themes: (1) legal awareness and political identity, (2) barriers to legal participation, (3) law as an enabler of engagement, and (4) navigating legal ambiguity. Participants demonstrated varying degrees of legal knowledge, often relying on informal sources such as social media or peer networks. Legal uncertainty, fear of prosecution, and institutional distrust were significant deterrents to formal political involvement. However, youth also employed creative strategies to engage politically, such as symbolic protest, digital activism, and peer-supported risk management. Civil society organizations and digital legal tools emerged as key mediators of legal knowledge and empowerment. Despite constraints, law also served as a source of legitimacy and a framework for moral reasoning in political action. The study underscores the dual role of law in both restricting and enabling youth political engagement in semi-authoritarian contexts. Legal consciousness among youth is shaped through complex interactions with state institutions, civil society, digital media, and intergenerational knowledge. Promoting accessible legal education and youth-inclusive policy reforms is essential for enhancing civic participation.

Keywords: *Youth political engagement; legal consciousness; semi-authoritarian regimes; civic participation; qualitative research; Tehran; legal repression; digital activism.*

Introduction

Youth political engagement represents a critical component of democratic vitality, signaling both present participation and future citizenship trajectories. Political theorists and civic educators alike have long argued that the inclusion of youth in political life not only contributes to the legitimacy of democratic processes but also fosters the development of political efficacy and collective responsibility among younger generations (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Yet, the engagement of youth in political activities is neither automatic nor evenly distributed. In many



societies—especially those with restrictive or ambiguous legal frameworks—youth political engagement is conditioned by legal consciousness, access to information, and the perceived risk of state response (Neundorff, Smets, & García-Albacete, 2013). The law, as both an enabler and constraint, plays a central role in shaping how young people conceptualize, enact, and limit their political participation.

Within the Iranian context, where this study is situated, youth engagement with politics occurs under complex legal and institutional conditions. The Iranian legal system provides for certain formal political rights such as voting and limited association, but the enforcement of these rights is inconsistent, and legal frameworks often contain ambiguities that contribute to a climate of uncertainty and fear (Keshavarzian, 2009). Furthermore, political expression—particularly in the form of protest, digital activism, or student organizing—is frequently regulated under vague statutes related to public order, national security, or defamation, making it difficult for youth to discern the boundaries of legal behavior (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2019). This ambiguity in legal regulation fosters a fragmented political environment in which some youth choose compliance or disengagement, while others actively negotiate or resist legal constraints.

Understanding how young people perceive and interact with legal institutions is crucial in this context. Recent research in the field of youth studies emphasizes that political engagement is deeply shaped by young people's legal awareness and their interpretations of justice and legitimacy (Gordon & Taft, 2011). Legal consciousness, or the everyday ways in which individuals understand and use the law, becomes a vital analytic tool for examining the dynamics of youth political agency (Silbey, 2005). For youth, whose access to political capital is often limited by age, institutional mistrust, and generational hierarchies, the law can be experienced simultaneously as a tool for empowerment and a mechanism of surveillance or repression. The duality of law in such contexts is not merely theoretical; it is lived through interactions with police, experiences in educational institutions, or decisions to participate in—or abstain from—civic actions.

The literature on youth political participation often highlights structural and psychological determinants, such as family socialization, civic education, and political interest (Sloam, 2014). However, the legal dimension—how statutory and procedural frameworks enable or discourage participation—has received comparatively less attention, particularly in non-Western or semi-authoritarian settings. In such contexts, legal factors do not merely set the boundaries of permissible political action but actively shape political subjectivities. Young people are not passive recipients of legal discourse; they actively interpret, internalize, and resist it in ways that shape their engagement patterns. Research from Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Asia has documented how legal uncertainty contributes to political withdrawal among youth, while also generating new forms of informal or digital political engagement that operate at the margins of legality (Treré, 2019; Fregonese, 2017).

One important dimension in this legal-political nexus is the criminalization of youth activism. Across a range of contexts, young people face disproportionate policing and legal scrutiny when they attempt to organize protests, express dissent online, or engage in community mobilization. This experience of criminalization often intersects with broader experiences of marginalization, including socioeconomic precarity, ethnic or gender-based discrimination, and lack of access to legal support (Taft, 2011). These legal pressures can lead to a chilling effect, where the potential cost of political engagement outweighs perceived benefits. Alternatively, in some cases, these pressures contribute to a deeper politicization, as youth develop alternative strategies of resistance and legal literacy to navigate or subvert repressive environments (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

Another key aspect involves the accessibility of legal knowledge. Many young people in restrictive environments rely on informal networks—peers, family, online forums—to understand their rights and responsibilities under the law (Gallagher, 2017). The lack of formal civic education or youth-specific legal resources compounds this dependency, often resulting in fragmented or inaccurate understandings of legal protections. At the same time, civil society organizations, student groups, and digital platforms have emerged as critical mediators of legal knowledge, offering tools such as rights-awareness apps, legal helplines, and workshops on protest law or digital safety (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). These non-state actors play a pivotal role in shaping the legal consciousness of youth, especially in contexts where formal institutions are viewed with suspicion or hostility.

In the Iranian context, these dynamics are especially pronounced. Iran has a large and politically aware youth population, many of whom are educated and active on digital platforms. Yet, this engagement is often marked by legal ambiguity and risk. The Iranian Penal Code includes provisions that can be invoked broadly against dissent, including those related to “propaganda against the regime” or “disturbing public opinion” (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Simultaneously, the constitution recognizes certain civic rights, including freedom of assembly and expression, though these are frequently restricted in practice. Youth in Iran therefore navigate a contradictory legal landscape: one that formally recognizes their rights while informally punishing their exercise. This tension is evident in the lived experiences of Iranian youth, who often develop hybrid forms of engagement—digital activism, symbolic resistance, or quiet compliance—that reflect a deep awareness of the law’s double-edged nature (Bayat, 2010).

In this regard, law is not only a structure that shapes youth participation from above but also a site of contestation and meaning-making. As scholars in legal anthropology and critical legal studies have argued, law functions as a cultural and discursive practice, not simply as a formal set of rules (Merry, 2006; Ewick & Silbey, 1998). Youth, as legal subjects, are continually interpreting the meanings, risks, and potentials of law as they decide how and whether to engage politically. Their actions, whether confrontational or cautious, are shaped by a deep and often implicit reading of the legal terrain in which they operate.

This study seeks to contribute to the growing literature on youth political engagement by focusing specifically on the role of law in shaping young people’s perceptions and behaviors in Iran. Using a qualitative case study approach, we explore how 20 youth participants from Tehran understand legal rights, perceive the risks and protections afforded by legal frameworks, and navigate the complexities of political participation in a legally ambiguous environment. Our research is guided by the following questions: (1) How do youth perceive the legal frameworks surrounding political engagement? (2) What legal factors do youth identify as enabling or constraining their political participation? (3) How do young people negotiate, resist, or comply with legal boundaries in their political activities?

Through this inquiry, we aim to illuminate the nuanced and often contradictory ways in which law functions in the political lives of youth. Rather than assuming law is simply repressive or liberatory, we examine it as a dynamic and contested arena in which political agency is both constrained and expressed. By focusing on the lived experiences of youth in Tehran, our study offers empirical insight into the micro-level interactions between law and political behavior, contributing to broader debates about legal consciousness, state-society relations, and youth citizenship in non-democratic contexts.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how legal frameworks influence youth political engagement in Tehran. The case study approach was selected to allow for an in-depth, contextualized examination

of participants' lived experiences and perceptions within a specific socio-political and legal environment. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation of diverse perspectives, including students, recent graduates, young activists, and individuals involved in community-based initiatives. The sample comprised 20 young individuals aged between 18 and 30, all residing in Tehran at the time of the study. Participants were selected based on their willingness to reflect on their political engagement and their experiences navigating the legal structures governing political activity. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes were emerging from the data.

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency across interviews and the flexibility to probe emergent topics relevant to each participant's experience. An interview guide was developed to elicit insights into participants' understanding of legal rights and restrictions, experiences with legal institutions (e.g., electoral commissions, police, courts), and perceived barriers or enablers of political participation. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in private settings to ensure confidentiality and encourage open dialogue. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. An inductive thematic analysis approach was employed, allowing patterns to emerge from the data without being constrained by a pre-existing theoretical framework. The analysis process began with open coding of the interview transcripts, followed by axial coding to establish relationships among the initial codes. Finally, selective coding was used to refine core themes that captured the role of legal structures in shaping youth political engagement. Memos were written throughout the coding process to document analytic insights and guide theme development. To ensure the credibility of the analysis, two independent researchers reviewed a subset of coded transcripts and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Legal Awareness and Political Identity

Participants expressed varying levels of understanding of legal rights, particularly in relation to voting, protesting, and civic expression. While some had a general awareness of laws regulating demonstrations, others admitted confusion or misinformation. As one 22-year-old male participant shared, "I know we have the right to vote, but I'm not sure what the law really says about protesting in groups. Is it even allowed?"

The sources of legal information were primarily informal, with many participants citing social media platforms, family conversations, or peer networks as their main channels for learning about the law. One student explained, "I didn't learn anything about political laws in school. Most of what I know, I heard from Telegram or Instagram."

For many, legal understanding significantly contributed to the formation of political identity. A number of participants described how becoming aware of their rights shaped their sense of citizenship and encouraged civic engagement. One participant said, "Once I realized how the constitution protects freedom of expression, I started feeling like I had a role to play in society."

However, this process was often disrupted by distrust in legal messaging. Several interviewees voiced skepticism toward state-promoted information about legal rights, believing it was selectively presented. A 25-year-old participant remarked, "The government tells you about your rights on paper, but on the street, it's a different story."

Youth often relied on informal learning channels, such as NGO-led workshops, activist-run Telegram groups, or YouTube videos. These were described as more trustworthy and relevant. “A legal activist on YouTube explained rights better than any textbook ever did,” said a 20-year-old woman.

Participants also highlighted the influence of misinformation, stating that rumors and legal myths were common. One participant recalled, “I once heard that if you attend one protest, you’ll be banned from university forever. I don’t know if it’s true, but it scares people.”

In addition, many youths demonstrated a selective understanding of the law, often emphasizing specific areas such as protest regulations while neglecting others like tax duties or public service laws. A 19-year-old noted, “I know a lot about protest laws, but not much about other parts of civil law. No one really talks about that.”

Theme 2: Barriers to Legal Participation

A pervasive fear of legal consequences was evident across interviews, acting as a major deterrent to political involvement. Participants described concerns about arrest, surveillance, and social stigma. One participant confessed, “Even sharing a political post makes me anxious. What if it gets tracked back to me?”

Many also encountered the complexity of legal procedures, which created confusion and discouraged engagement. The language of official documents and the bureaucratic pathways to secure permits or defend rights were described as inaccessible. “The legal system is like a puzzle—hard to understand and impossible to finish,” one 23-year-old explained.

Several participants discussed the criminalization of activism, noting that even peaceful involvement is viewed with suspicion. “You join a rally, and suddenly you’re a criminal,” said one female participant. “It’s not illegal, but it feels illegal.”

Limited access to legal aid was another prominent barrier. Youths shared experiences of lacking affordable or youth-sensitive legal support when confronted with legal threats. “I wouldn’t know where to go if I needed a lawyer. And I couldn’t afford one anyway,” noted a participant.

The invisibility in policy discourse was also frustrating. Young people felt overlooked by lawmakers and excluded from legal reform processes. “No one asks us what we think about new laws. We’re treated like kids, not citizens,” stated a 24-year-old man.

Lastly, institutional distrust ran deep. Participants cited perceived corruption, discriminatory enforcement, and inconsistency in legal application as reasons for avoiding legal interaction. “The law depends on who you are. If you’re poor or outspoken, it works against you,” one youth observed.

Theme 3: Law as an Enabler of Participation

Despite these challenges, some participants highlighted legal reforms supporting youth engagement, including legal changes that permitted greater NGO activity or lowered barriers to civic organization. “We were able to register a student group legally, which felt like a win,” one participant noted.

Others pointed to constitutional guarantees, such as freedom of expression and assembly, as important legal backbones. A 26-year-old remarked, “Even though it’s risky, I remind myself that the constitution gives me this right—it’s not a favor.”

Several youths had accessed legal platforms for engagement, including student unions, youth councils, and online petitioning systems. “The online petition law gave us a legal way to raise issues—it’s not much, but it’s something,” said one respondent.

Some participants appreciated digital legal tools that enhanced access to information and support. Apps offering legal advice or rights awareness were especially popular. “There’s an app that tells you your rights during arrest—it gives me some peace of mind,” one woman stated.

The role of civil society in legal empowerment was frequently mentioned. NGOs and community-based organizations were credited with providing legal education, safe forums for participation, and mentorship. “Without that local youth group, I’d still be clueless about my rights,” reflected one participant.

Theme 4: Navigating Legal Ambiguity

Participants described various strategies for coping with vague laws, often erring on the side of caution. A 21-year-old shared, “It’s better not to act than to risk misinterpreting the law. You never know what will trigger trouble.”

Legal evasion strategies included anonymous activism, use of symbolism, and satire to avoid legal repercussions. “We use memes and sarcasm to say things. It’s safer than direct slogans,” explained a media student.

There was a strong emphasis on peer-supported risk management, where youth relied on each other to assess legal boundaries and plan actions. “Before any event, we talk about what could go wrong and prepare together,” said one participant.

Some youths weighed moral vs. legal legitimacy, believing their conscience justified actions not explicitly legal. A 25-year-old activist stated, “If the law stops me from doing what’s right, I choose what’s right.”

The ambiguity in law enforcement was a recurring concern. Participants highlighted how the same actions could yield different responses depending on the officer or the context. “Sometimes the police ignore us, sometimes they arrest us—it’s all about luck,” a participant said.

Interestingly, participants referenced generational strategies of resistance, learning tactics from older activists and family members. “My uncle protested years ago. He taught me how to stay calm when things get tense,” one participant recalled.

Finally, youths discussed everyday legal negotiation, like quietly checking regulations before planning events or consulting lawyers through informal channels. “We’re always negotiating—asking, researching, calculating risk. It’s become second nature,” one interviewee concluded.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted role of law in shaping how young people in Tehran engage with political processes. Four central themes emerged: (1) legal awareness and political identity, (2) barriers to legal participation, (3) law as an enabler of engagement, and (4) strategies for navigating legal ambiguity. Collectively, these themes illustrate that legal structures are not neutral backdrops to political action but active components of youth political subjectivity. Participants’ experiences revealed a dynamic interplay between legal knowledge, fear, agency, and improvisation. Law, as encountered by youth, functioned both as a resource for empowerment and as a mechanism of restraint.

First, legal awareness was shown to be a crucial but uneven factor in political identity formation among youth. Participants expressed varying levels of knowledge about their political rights, with many relying on informal sources such as social media, family, or activist-led workshops. This mirrors existing literature emphasizing that in the absence of formal civic education, youth often develop “vernacular legal consciousness” shaped by their immediate sociopolitical environment (Ewick & Silbey, 1998; Silbey, 2005). For some, knowing their rights contributed to a

stronger sense of civic identity and a feeling of legitimacy in participating in public life. However, misinformation and selective understanding—particularly regarding protest laws or criminal liability—resulted in heightened anxiety and uncertainty. This aligns with research showing that partial or fragmented legal knowledge can undermine political efficacy, especially in restrictive contexts (Merry, 2006; Treré, 2019).

Second, legal barriers to participation were consistently cited as a key deterrent. Participants described the law as opaque, punitive, and unequally enforced. Ambiguities in legal language, inconsistencies in implementation, and the criminalization of peaceful activism created a pervasive climate of fear. These findings support the argument that legal repression, even when selectively applied, has a chilling effect on political engagement (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Gallagher, 2017). The fear of arrest, family backlash, or being blacklisted discouraged many from participating in even low-risk political activities. Moreover, the lack of accessible legal aid or youth-oriented legal services amplified the sense of vulnerability. This echoes previous studies that point to structural exclusion from justice systems as a critical factor in youth political marginalization (Taft, 2011; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2019).

Despite these constraints, participants also recognized legal mechanisms that enabled engagement. Some noted that reforms such as the legalization of student associations or the availability of online petition systems provided formal avenues for participation. These findings suggest that even in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, pockets of legal opportunity can emerge, offering spaces for constrained but meaningful political activity (Neundorff et al., 2013; Bayat, 2010). The role of civil society organizations in facilitating legal literacy and safe political expression was particularly important. NGOs and local youth groups provided alternative channels for rights education and advocacy, supporting studies that emphasize the importance of non-state actors in fostering legal empowerment (Isin & Ruppert, 2020; Gordon & Taft, 2011).

The theme of navigating legal ambiguity further complicates the binary of legality and illegality. Participants did not simply accept legal constraints passively; rather, they developed nuanced strategies to engage politically within or around legal limits. These included anonymous activism, symbolic protest, peer-supported risk management, and reliance on informal legal advice. Such strategies illustrate the concept of “legal bricolage,” where individuals creatively repurpose legal knowledge and tactics to negotiate repressive environments (Merry, 2006). This aligns with Fregonese’s (2017) findings on urban youth activism, where the legality of protest is constantly renegotiated through spatial, symbolic, and tactical choices. Youth in this study actively evaluated the moral versus legal legitimacy of their actions, underscoring the ethical dimensions of political participation under duress.

Importantly, generational influences played a role in shaping legal strategies. Several participants referenced family members or older activists who guided them in understanding risks and crafting responses to legal threats. This intergenerational transmission of legal-political knowledge highlights the cumulative nature of political learning in environments characterized by long-term legal repression (Gallagher, 2017). Furthermore, the institutional distrust expressed by participants—manifested in perceptions of legal bias, corruption, and double standards—supports existing critiques of rule-of-law frameworks in authoritarian regimes, where law functions more as a tool of control than of justice (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2019).

One significant insight from this study is that youth do not uniformly reject or embrace the law. Rather, they demonstrate complex attitudes that fluctuate between hope, fear, strategic compliance, and resistance. Law is simultaneously a symbol of exclusion and a language through which young people articulate their aspirations for justice and inclusion. This resonates with Silbey’s (2005) theory of legal consciousness, which posits that law is both internalized and contested in everyday life. For participants in this study, engaging with law meant navigating

not only the boundaries of political legitimacy but also the emotional terrain of hope, anxiety, and moral responsibility.

Moreover, digital technologies played a dual role. While they served as key sources of legal knowledge and tools for safer political engagement, they also exposed youth to surveillance and heightened risk. This ambivalence echoes Treré's (2019) analysis of hybrid media activism, which highlights both the empowering and precarious dimensions of digital engagement. Participants' use of encrypted messaging apps, digital legal toolkits, and anonymous social media accounts illustrate a growing trend of digitally mediated legal consciousness among politically active youth.

From a broader perspective, these findings suggest that legal institutions and practices cannot be understood outside of their cultural and political context. The Iranian legal system, like many in hybrid regimes, presents a contradictory face: offering formal guarantees of rights while informally curbing their exercise. Youth must therefore read between the lines of the law, engage in collective interpretation, and construct informal networks of legal resilience. This case study reinforces the need to conceptualize youth political engagement not merely in terms of behavior but as a process of continuous negotiation with legal, institutional, and moral boundaries.

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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