

Political Science Scholarship on the Middle East: A View from the Journals

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ABSTRACT

Based on an original dataset of all articles on the Middle East in major political science journals during the past two decades, we assess trends in publishing on the region to explore whether it remains underrepresented in political science and how the field has evolved. We focus on the evolution of the total share of Middle East and North Africa (MENA)-focused articles, research topics, methods employed, and patterns of authorship by gender. The proportion of MENA-focused articles has increased, particularly after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, but remains strikingly low. With respect to topics and methods, research on the Middle East is increasingly integrated in mainstream political science, with articles addressing core disciplinary debates and relying increasingly more on statistical and experimental methods. Yet, these shifts may come at the expense of predominantly qualitative research, and primary topics may reflect the priorities of Western researchers while underplaying the major concerns of Middle Eastern publics.


Scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been depicted as marginalized in the discipline of political science (Tessler, Nachtwey, and Banda 1999). A crude, essentialist explanation for the apparent neglect points to cultural exceptionalism as a result of unique features of Islam, the dominant religion in the region, or of Arab culture (Huntington 1993), which allegedly limit the generalizability of findings based on Middle Eastern cases. In the twenty-first century, however, few would openly advance these claims. Less controversial explanations center on the limitations on data collection and generation arising from the region's large endowment of authoritarian regimes, which restrict access to information; the high prevalence of violent conflict, which limits the ability to conduct fieldwork and undercuts institutional efforts to catalog data; and the high requisite investment in language skills to study the region (Anderson 1999; Lust-Okar et al. 2007). The fact that most "big" research questions in political science have emerged from the experiences of advanced industrialized countries in the West also has limited the perceived contributions of findings from the region to the discipline (Lustick 2000).

This article assesses disciplinary trends in publishing on the Middle East¹ during the past two decades to explore whether the region still remains underrepresented in political science scholarship and to understand how MENA-focused research has evolved. Our analyses are based on an original, comprehensive dataset of all journal articles focusing on Middle Eastern cases from 2000 through 2019 in major political science journals. Based on descriptive analyses, we focused primarily on the evolution of the total share of MENA-focused articles, research topics, methods of data collection and analysis, and patterns of authorship by gender.

THE DATASET

Several overarching decisions guided the construction of the dataset. First, we included only empirically focused research, which means that the overwhelming majority of articles come from the subfield of comparative politics, with a smaller share from international relations. Second, we excluded books and edited volumes, in which some of the most important scholarship on the Middle East continues to be published. Third, our findings were not contextualized in cross-regional comparative perspective, hindering our ability to make inferences about how scholarship on the Middle East fares vis-à-vis other regions in disciplinary journals. Fourth, we incorporated only broad disciplinary journals rather than those devoted to a specific issue, such as conflict, development, or political behavior.

To construct the dataset, we first determined which journals to survey. Although recognizing the limitations of citation and

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reputation metrics as a measure of the quality and importance of scholarship (Giles and Garand 2007; Teele and Thelen 2017), our primary inclusion criterion was based on triangulation among several major disciplinary journal-ranking systems. (Part I of the online appendix describes the selection criteria in more detail.) The resultant sample of publications included *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Annual Review of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, *World Politics*, *International Organization*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Comparative Politics*,

3.9% in 2015. Across journals, coverage of the Middle East varies. Since 2000, almost half (about 45%) of MENA-focused articles have been published by three journals: *Comparative Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and *International Studies Quarterly*.²

Despite the increase in MENA coverage, the rate of growth in MENA-focused articles is lower than that of total articles published in these journals. Although publishing on the MENA region has increased, coverage of the region remains strikingly low.³

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British Journal of Political Science, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*. Including more specialized journals, such as *International Security*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, and *World Development*, likely would have changed some of our findings on the margins. The journals in our dataset also overlap substantially with those included in surveys of publication trends in the profession by Giles and Garand (2007) and Teele and Thelen (2017).

We included articles on Arab countries, Turkey, Iran, and Israel, along with publications covering aggregates such as the “Arab region,” “Middle East,” and “North Africa”; we omitted articles with less than one third of empirical evidence devoted to MENA cases. Our coverage spans the past two decades (i.e., 2000 through 2019), which allowed us to see trends during a period encompassing major events such as 9/11 and the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings.

Each article was hand-coded to record the year of publication, journal name, topic(s), method(s), geographic coverage, number of authors, and author gender(s). For articles relying on multiple methods, we distinguished between the primary and secondary approaches, and we coded the “primary” topic based on the main outcome or dependent variable. The resultant dataset encompasses 20 years, 13 journals, 290 unique authors, and 222 articles, of which 113 are single-authored papers and 109 are coauthored (Cammett and Kendall 2020).

MENA COVERAGE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE JOURNALS

Descriptive findings from the dataset depict the evolution of MENA-focused scholarship in political science across multiple criteria. We focused on the share of the region’s coverage in disciplinary journals, topics addressed, methods used, and authorship trends, including the gender breakdown of single-authored and coauthored pieces in comparison with the discipline as a whole and on gender differences in methodological approaches.

As shown in figure 1, total articles on all topics and regions published in mainstream political science journals have increased substantially, with the number nearly doubling in the past 20 years. In 2000, 322 articles were published; in 2019, the number increased to 649 articles. The number of articles focusing on the MENA region also has increased from four articles in 2000 to 18 in 2019, with a peak of 22 articles in 2016 and a minimum of three in 2001. Publications focusing on the Middle East also have increased as a percentage of journal content from 1.2% in 2000 to 2.8% in 2019, spiking after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and peaking at

TOPICS

Next, we focused on topics covered in MENA-focused scholarship (table 1). Our coding scheme encompassed 12 different topics covering all substantive areas of research addressed in the dataset: political regimes, which include democracy, authoritarianism, and regime transitions; religion and politics, which include political Islam; social mobilization and civil society; gender; political economy and development; patronage and clientelism; international relations, which includes interstate relations in the region, the foreign policy of MENA states, and anti-Americanism among Middle Eastern publics; political violence, which largely centers on studies of terrorism; conflict and conflict resolution, which includes international and civil wars; identity, which largely encompasses research on ethnic and sectarian politics; elections and voting behavior; and political institutions. An alternative coding scheme could combine some topics, but our disaggregated approach facilitates a closer review of the range of issues treated in scholarship on the Middle East.

Table 1 shows the cumulative share of topics covered in the sample. Social mobilization and conflict account for the largest shares, with 30 and 28 articles covering those topics, respectively. A closer review of articles on conflict and political violence reveals that the majority are based on research focusing on Israel or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which together account for 83.3% of articles on political violence (10 of 12 articles) and 39.3% of articles on conflict (11 of 28 articles), respectively. Several articles also focus on regimes, reflecting the importance of the research program on persistent authoritarianism in the region.

Conversely, the least amount of scholarly attention is devoted to gender and patronage and clientelism. This is surprising because both—especially patronage and clientelism—are increasingly important research topics on the Middle East. With regard to patronage and clientelism, this result may arise because the topic partially overlaps with another topic—political economy and development—and it also might be an artifact of our coding criteria, which classify the primary topic of an article based on the focus of the dependent variable.

The evolution of topics covered in MENA-focused scholarship reflects the relative rise and decline of different research programs. Figures 2a–2d depict the increased attention to certain substantive areas over time.

As demonstrated in figures 2a through 2d, research on social mobilization and regimes spiked dramatically after the 2011 Arab

Figure 1

The Evolution of Total Articles and MENA-Focused Articles in Political Science Journals, 2000–2019

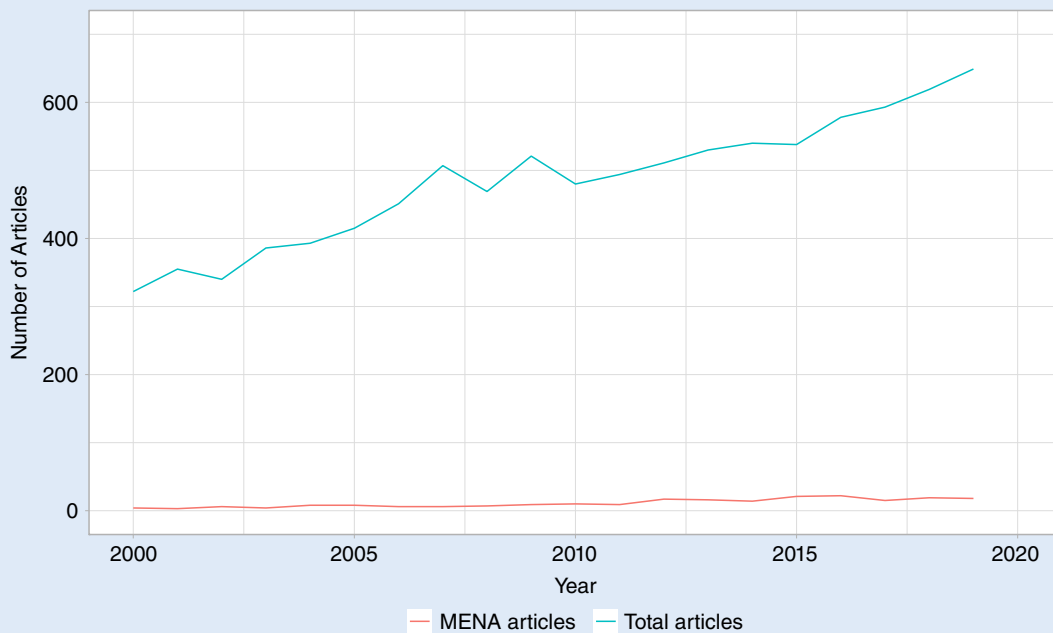


Table 1

Topics in MENA-Focused Articles in Political Science Journals, 2000–2019

Topic	Articles	Percentage
Social Mobilization	30	13.5
Conflict	28	12.6
Regimes	25	11.3
Religion and Politics	24	10.8
Elections and Voting Behavior	23	10.4
International Relations	22	9.9
Identity, Culture, and Norms	16	7.2
Political Institutions	16	7.2
Political Economy and Development	13	5.9
Political Violence	12	5.4
Gender	8	3.6
Patronage and Clientelism	5	2.3

Spring uprisings, as would be expected. Widespread protests across the Arab world attracted broad attention from global media outlets, mirrored in an increase of academic research on mobilization, civil society, persistent authoritarianism, and democratic transitions immediately after 2011. In addition, articles on social mobilization peaked again in 2018.

A similar spike does not occur in articles that focus on elections and voting behavior at the same point in time.⁴ Articles focusing on this topic remain stable after 2011, with an increase from 2013 to 2015. This is driven by two factors: (1) a large share

of articles assessing elections focus on Israel; and (2) the time lag between important political changes resulting from the Arab Spring uprisings and subsequent electoral contests. Furthermore, articles covering elections decreased substantially in 2016 and remained low until 2019. In 2016, publications on conflict in the region spiked, increasing from four in 2015 to nine in 2016, with most focusing on Iraq, Israel and Israel–Palestine, and Syria.

Last, articles focusing on political economy and development increased slightly after 2010. This may be due in part to the widespread demands of protestors for economic and social rights alongside civic and political freedoms during the Arab Spring uprisings (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2017). Nonetheless, political economy and development remain relatively marginal topics in MENA-focused scholarship, despite their importance in the daily life of citizens.

METHODS

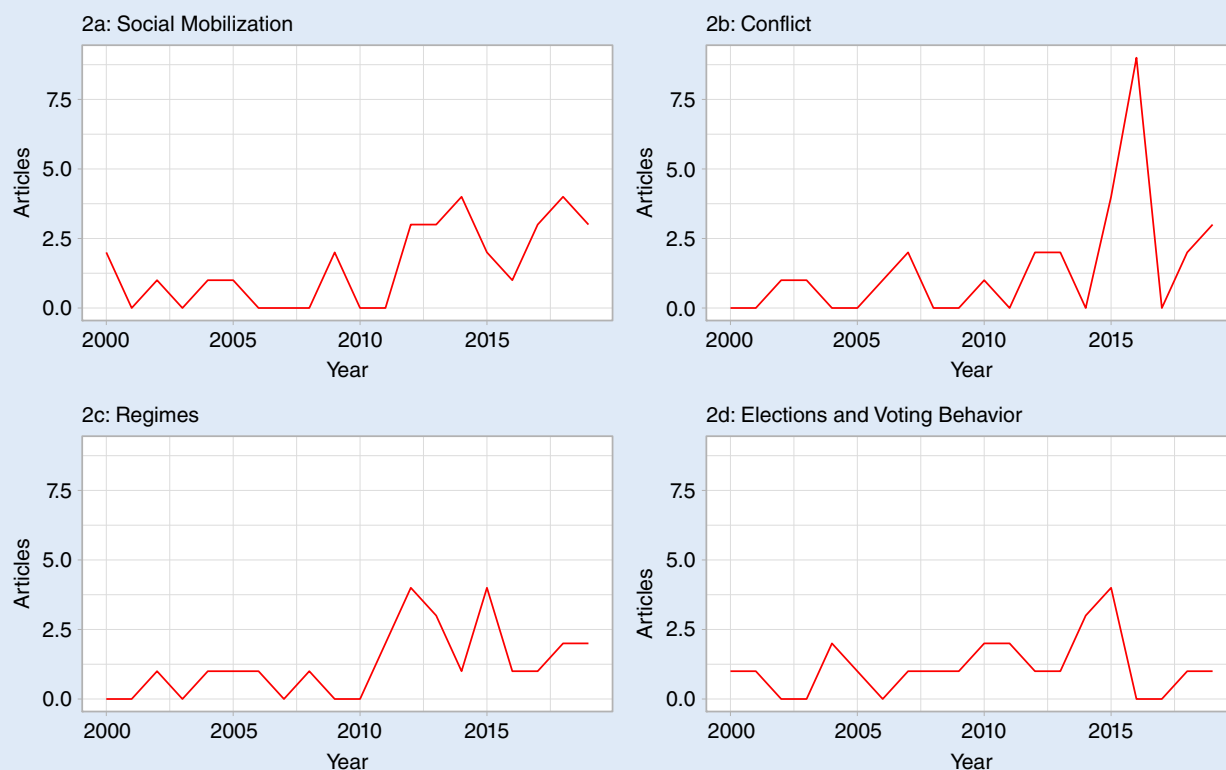
Following Teele and Thelen (2017), we classified research methods into four main categories: experiments, formal theory, qualitative, and statistical (figure 3). (Part IV of the online appendix presents results depicting additional qualitative and statistical subtypes.)

Figure 3 shows the share of research methods used in MENA-focused research from 2000 through 2019. An overwhelming majority of articles use either qualitative or statistical methods, with a small minority using experiments and an even smaller fraction using formal theory.

Despite the widespread claim that qualitative research is underrepresented in mainstream political science journals, this does not seem to be the case for scholarship on the Middle East on aggregate. As figure 3 shows, 44% of MENA-focused articles use

Figures 2a–2d

The Evolution of Selected Topics in MENA-Focused Scholarship in Political Science Journals, 2000–2019



qualitative methods, a share almost equivalent to the 45% using statistical methods. Although we lack cross-regional comparative data, this percentage seems higher than the norm. On the one hand, this is encouraging for qualitative researchers. On the other hand—and in light of the apparent marginalization of research on the region in mainstream political science journals (see figure 1)—this raises questions about whether the seemingly high percentage of qualitative work contributes to the pattern, especially given the increased dominance of quantitative methods in many top journals (Teele and Thelen 2017, 440).

Although we recognize that multimethods research has gained increasing recognition in the discipline, we report only the primary methods used in a given article. In our dataset, about 8% of articles use two or more methods, with most combining statistical and qualitative methods.

The relative importance of distinct methods in MENA-focused political science publications has changed substantially over time. Figures 4a through 4d show trends in the four overarching types of research methods during the past two decades. Whereas the use of formal theory and qualitative approaches is relatively flat, articles using experiments and statistical methods have spiked. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings, publications using statistical methods exhibited a sharp increase, likely due in part to the (at least temporary) increased availability of data in more politically open environments. In line with developments in the profession, experimental research is on the rise, a trend that promises to continue. Articles using ethnography and interviews as their

primary methods remain extremely low, whereas the number of publications using single and comparative case studies has declined in the past five to ten years.

GENDER IN THE JOURNALS: AUTHORSHIP TRENDS IN MENA-FOCUSED SCHOLARSHIP

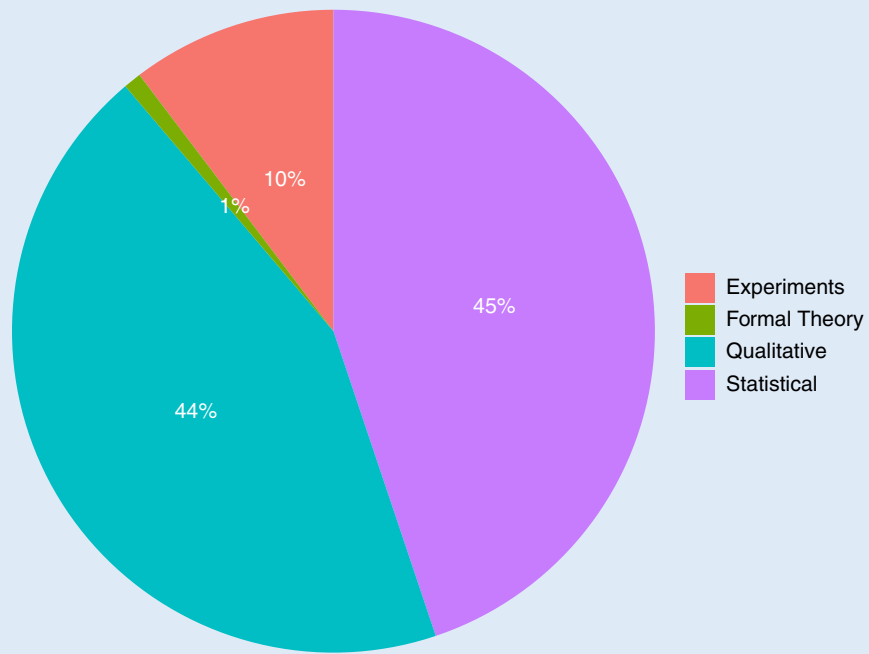
The dataset enabled us to track authorship trends. We focused on overall gender patterns, the gender breakdown of single-authored versus coauthored articles, and the possible association between gender and methodological approach. Teele and Thelen's (2017) study of gender representation in 10 political science journals—of which all but two are in our dataset—enabled us to roughly benchmark our findings vis-à-vis broader disciplinary patterns.

To recap Teele and Thelen's (2017) main findings, female authors constitute a lower share of authors in the top political science journals than their proportion in the profession warrants; most published collaborative research is produced by all-male teams; and a tendency to favor quantitative work is associated with the underrepresentation of female authors, who produce a higher share of qualitative research.

How do these patterns in the profession compare with published research on the Middle East in political science? In disciplinary research on the Middle East during the past two decades, women generated 33.1% of all research. As figure 5 shows, however, among single-authored articles, the gap between male and female authors may be less stark than in the profession as a whole. In

Figure 3

Research Methods Employed in MENA-Focused Scholarship in Political Science Journals, 2000–2019



Figures 4a–4d

The Evolution of Research Methods Used in MENA-Focused Scholarship in Political Science Journals, 2000–2019

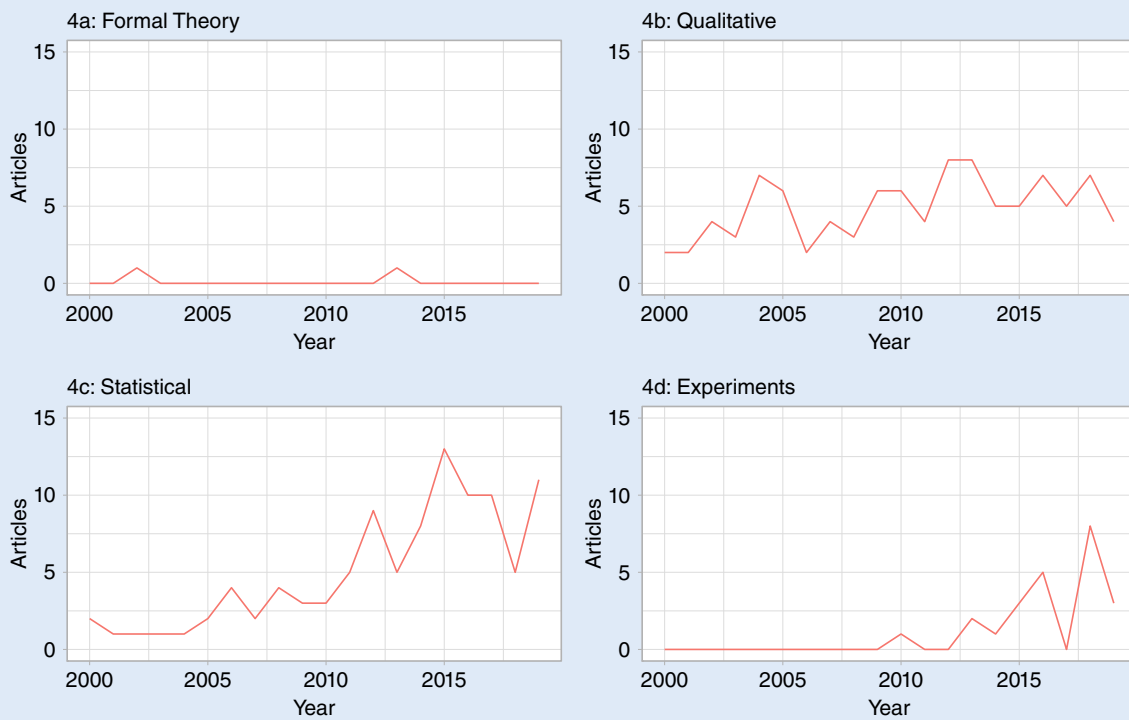


Figure 5
Author Composition of MENA-Focused Articles in Political Science Journals, 2000–2019

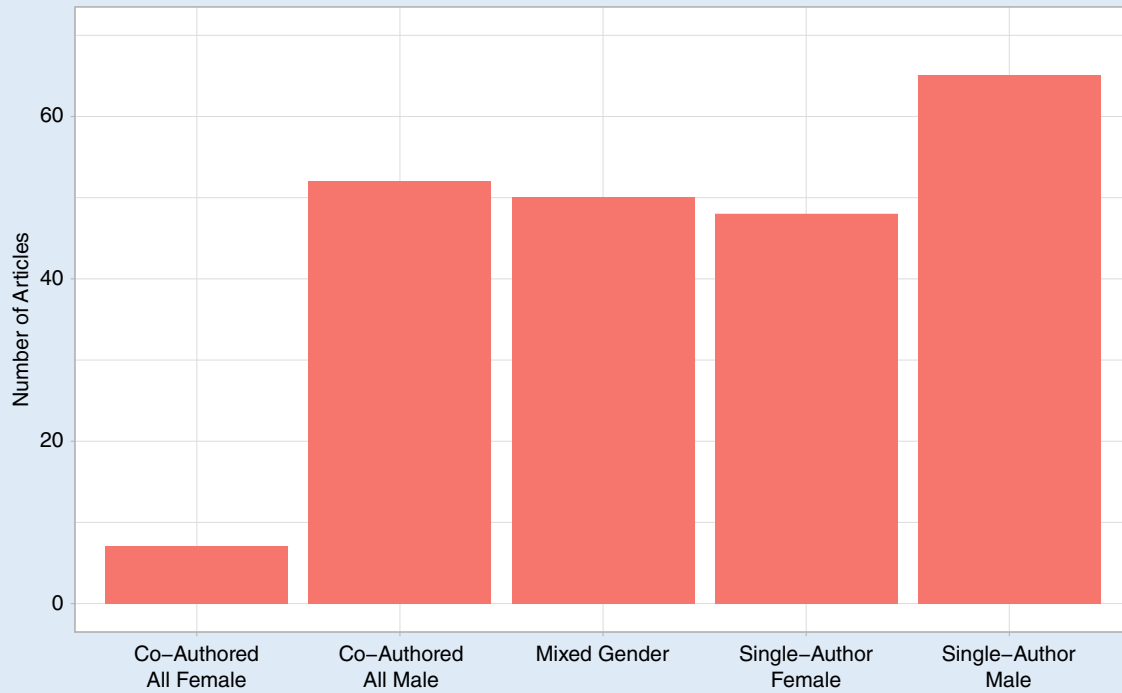
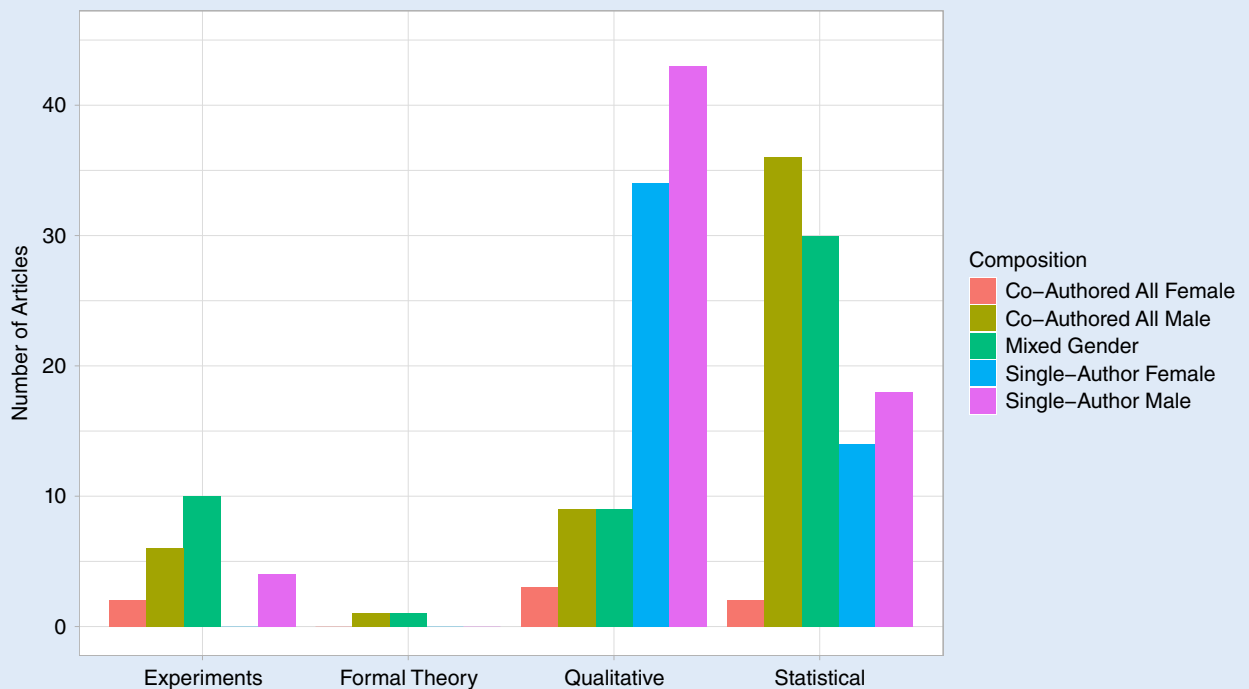


Figure 6
Author Composition of MENA-Focused Articles in Political Science Journals by Primary Method, 2000–2019



Teele and Thelen's (2017) journal sample, single-authored publications by women constituted 17.1% and by men 41.1% of the total. In our sample, men wrote about 30% and women about 22% of all single-authored articles.

Political science scholarship on the Middle East is increasingly coauthored, mirroring a general disciplinary trend. Among sets of coauthors, only a few—seven, to be precise—are composed of all-female teams (see figure 5). Rather, among coauthored articles, about 48% is produced by all-male teams and mixed groups generate an almost equal share (46%). The strikingly low percentage of all-female teams is consistent with Teele and Thelen's (2017) findings; however, the difference between the proportion of all-male teams and mixed teams is much less stark among MENA-focused scholarship than in general political science research published in mainstream journals.

Figure 6 depicts the distribution of methodological approaches by gender. Among the dominant methods favored in mainstream political science journals—that is, statistical and experimental—the majority are produced by male authors, as in the profession as a whole. Patterns of authorship among practitioners of qualitative methods, however, exhibit a striking difference from the discipline

programs have enabled MENA specialists (and non-specialists) to engage more fully with core disciplinary debates. Nonetheless, the highest-growth topics may reflect in part the priorities of Western researchers and agencies. Less attention is given to questions related to political economy and development, which may reflect more closely the everyday concerns of citizens and perhaps of scholars in the Middle East (Teti, Abbott, and Cavatorta 2017).

In terms of methods, research on the Middle East is distinguished by the persistently important share of qualitative research, including among male researchers. However, in conformity with broader disciplinary trends, the major growth areas in methodological applications are those favored by mainstream journals, notably experimental and large-N statistical approaches. The use of qualitative methods has either remained flat over time or declined, particularly with respect to studies based on single cases.

Finally, with respect to authorship, female authors are less represented than their male counterparts in both single-authored and coauthored articles—as seen in the profession as a whole—but the gender gap may be less stark in MENA-focused scholarship.

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as a whole: men produce a higher share than women of articles primarily using qualitative methods in publications by both single-authored and single-gender, coauthored teams.

CONCLUSION

Specialists have long decried the apparent marginalization of the Middle East in political science. Based on an original dataset of all journal articles on the region from 2000 through 2019 in major political science journals, we probed this claim by providing a picture of disciplinary publishing trends. To conclude, we recap our main findings and offer observations about the state of disciplinary research on the Middle East as reflected in major political science journals.

The share of articles on the Middle East in mainstream political science journals has increased during the past two decades but remains strikingly low, increasing from 1.2% in 2000 to 2.8% in 2019. Without data on publishing trends on other regions in the journals, we cannot make comparative claims about the marginalization of MENA-focused scholarship; however, the proportion undoubtedly is quite small for a region with at least 22 countries.

Substantively, the topics that capture the attention of researchers on the region have evolved in the face of important

Collectively, our findings suggest that research on the Middle East is more integrated in the contemporary mainstream of political science than in the past, as reflected in the uptick of articles after the Arab Spring uprisings and the increased use of dominant statistical and experimental methods in the discipline. A small but growing set of articles using automated text analyses further integrates MENA-focused scholarship with cutting-edge disciplinary approaches—a trend that likely will increase as researchers are cut off from field research sites due to the Coronavirus pandemic, among other factors. The application of these methods, and their associated forms of data, enables scholars to answer questions in new ways; provide causal accounts that are more convincing to the contemporary mainstream of political science; engage in more types of multimethods research; and, in some cases, circumvent obstacles to field research posed by repressive and restrictive authoritarian regimes, violent conflict, and public health threats.

The application of new methodologies enhances Middle East scholarship in political science by diversifying data sources, arguments, and findings and also facilitates more integrated research designs. However, it may come at a price: the documented increase

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real-world phenomena such as 9/11 and the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, with spikes in scholarship on social mobilization, conflict, regimes, and elections, in particular. These research

in statistical and experimental approaches in the profession as a whole—and echoed in MENA-focused research—is associated with an apparent decrease in articles relying primarily on in-depth case

studies and ethnographic methods. These types of qualitative methods have well-known strengths including contributions to theory building, development and specification of concepts and measures, causal process tracing, and interpretation of contextually derived findings. In addition, qualitative methods enable researchers to devise more locally relevant and important questions in the first place, posing novel questions that might otherwise be overlooked by US- or Western-centric political science and likely resonating in other developing regions or, in some cases, in advanced, industrialized countries.

As we emphasize at the outset, our sample of mainstream disciplinary journals does not feature all the excellent MENA-focused research in political science, and articles published in other outlets are not inferior. The fact that qualitative work, which can yield unique insights and has distinct advantages in uncovering causal processes and interpreting meaning, is underrepresented in these journals bolsters this point. As a result, disciplinary trends in publishing may have narrowed the types of research published in mainstream political science journals such that they do not feature some of the most innovative and creative scholarship. Indeed, the underrepresentation of qualitative research on the Middle East in the disciplinary mainstream may arise in part because many political scientists specializing in the Middle East do not even choose to submit articles to the journals covered in this study, which they view as inhospitable to qualitative methods or favoring research on other regions. More fundamentally, what is published on the Middle East in the most-cited journals in the profession may not always reflect the priorities of scholars and of citizens in the region. Future research on MENA publishing trends should explore the types of topics and approaches prioritized by scholars based in the region to assess whether their research programs center on questions distinct from those featured in mainstream, US-based political science journals.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Replication materials are available on Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EIKB8U>.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096520002061>. ■

NOTES

1. We use the term “Middle East” to refer to the entire MENA region.
2. Part II of the online appendix includes a full breakdown of journal coverage of the region.
3. Again, data limitations prevent us from assessing how scholarship on the Middle East fares vis-à-vis other regions.
4. Figures showing the evolution of all topics from 2000 to 2019 are available in Part III of the online appendix.

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