



# Youth Political Participation and Trust in Democratic Institutions: A Study of University Students

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## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Political participation and trust in democratic institutions are critical indicators of the strength and sustainability of democratic systems. Among youth, particularly university students, these factors shape future civic engagement and governance outcomes.

**Objective:** To examine the patterns of political participation and levels of trust in democratic institutions among university students, and to explore how institutional trust influences youth engagement in political processes.

**Methods:** A mixed-methods approach was employed, surveying 400 university students and conducting in-depth interviews with 20 participants. Quantitative data captured trends in political participation, while qualitative interviews provided insights into perceptions, motivations, and barriers to engagement.

**Results:** The result showed that political involvement was moderate, and the most common form of participation was voting and digital activism, but official party membership was low. Democratic institutions were largely distrusted with poor scores in political parties and parliament but the judiciary scored relatively higher. Institutional trust and political participation have a positive and weak relationship. A set of qualitative themes consisted of ideas of corruption, inefficiency, and representation absence as obstacles and positive expectations about youth-led politics and the empowering influence of digital platforms.

**Conclusion:** The paper highlights the role of institutional trust in juvenile political participation and the Digital Divide as a significant limitation, especially among the more rural students. Increasing transparency, accountability, and digital inclusivity is the key to improving youth participation and resilience among democratic institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of political participation and belief in democratic institutions among the youth is considered to be two very crucial aspects of health and sustainability of democracies in the world (Saud et al., 2023; Mennes et al., 2023). The future of political participation and democratic leadership is held by youths, particularly, university attendees (Phan and Kloos, 2023; Maravé-Vivas et al., 2022). It can not only be a symptom of the political system but also a sign of the potential of a positive change in society (Certoma, 2022; Brandellero and Niutta, 2023). However, participation of the younger generation in the political process in many democracies is becoming alarmingly low, and the degree of distrust and mistrust towards democratic institutions is growing (Auerbach and Petrova, 2022; Gebrihet and Eidsvik, 2024). This paradox raises great concerns about the conditions, outcomes, as well as the possible solutions to disengagement among young citizens (Anciaux et al., 2023; Pena-Vega et al., 2022). The dynamics that this paper seeks to explore are those of a more educated and politically significant group of youth, that is, university students, in order to identify the trend of their political participation and the level of their trust to democratic institutions.

Youth political participation has long been considered an essential factor in the development of democratic principles, civic engagement, and social unity (Myoung and Liou, 2022). Young people are involved in politics when they vote, in political parties, as activists, or in any other type of participation; in this case, they help to make policies and leaders who will impact their lives and communities (Gee & Johnson, 2023). In addition, young people can re-energize politics, introduce new concepts, and disrupt established power dynamics through their involvement (Abou Ltaif and Mihai-Yiannaki, 2024; Todaka and Doering, 2023). On the other hand, political inactivity or absence of engagement among the youth

may result in the shortcoming of democracy, undermined accountability, and undermined legitimacy of political regimes (Craney, 2022).

Although it was noted that the way young people engage in political processes holds significant importance, recent researches have reported a disastrous trend of youth political participation across different democracies. Such a disengagement can be usually complemented by a general distrust in political institutions including parliaments, political parties and electoral institutions. One of the causes of this trend that was mentioned by scholars refers to the perception of corruption, inefficiency, the lack of transparency, and the inability of the political actors to represent the interests of young people (Gebrihet et al., 2023). The belief in not belonging to the democratic process and that feeling of alienation and lack of faith in the democratic mechanisms, in turn, may result in not encouraging the youth to engage in the political process, thus forming a vicious circle of being out of touch with the process and mistrust (Salmenniemi, 2022).

| HIGHLIGHTS         |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Research insights  | Findings reveal moderate political engagement among youth, with digital activism prevailing. Weak yet positive correlation exists between institutional trust and political participation among university students. |
| Practical insights | Enhancing institutional transparency, accountability, and digital literacy can foster greater youth trust and participation, empowering them to contribute meaningfully to democratic governance processes.          |
| Industry insights  | Educational and civic organizations should leverage digital tools and youth-led initiatives to strengthen institutional credibility, promote civic education, and sustain democratic engagement culture.             |

College students are put in a unique context of discussion of the youth in politics (Wahyuningroem et al., 2024). They tend to be more politically aware, they have a higher critical thinking ability, and they are exposed to various ideas than their non-university counterparts due to their university status (Chang and Kabilan, 2024). Such an environment is more likely to encourage political discussion, activism, and engagement (Barnason et al., 2022). However, regardless of this possibility, the cynicism and distrust of the political system may also be illustrated among the university students as the trends which can be noticed within the society. It is important to understand their political behavior and attitudes towards the institutions of democracy, therefore, in determining the obstacles and facilitators of youth participation (Augsberger et al., 2024).

The role played by youth in politics is especially significant in Pakistan, where democratic governance has been interrupted periodically, political instability, and dynamic civil-military relationships have been witnessed. In Pakistan, the electorate consists mostly of the young population, and their political perspective and participation can significantly influence the direction of democratic progress in the state (Tariq et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the institutional trust has been low, political polarization, political information gap, and socio-economic disparities have made it difficult to involve the youth in formal politics (Abebe et al., 2024). A comparison of the nature and extent of political participation and trust among Pakistani students of the university can perhaps provide valuable data on how the new generation will either enable or discourage the process of democratic consolidation.

Moreover, the nature of the young political participation has also been diversified regarding the traditional electoral politics (Ma & Cao, 2023). Social media, online activism, community organization, and issue-driven movements have become an important platform of political expression and action (Le et al., 2024). All these other forms of participation tend to be more appealing to younger generations of individuals who may be disillusioned by the institutional modes of politics, but are still committed to change in the society (van den Berg et al., 2024). This research will look at more than just formal political engagement like voting or party affiliation but also informal and online forms of engagement, to achieve a holistic approach to youth engagement.

Democratic institutions are also part of the pillars of a working democracy (González et al., 2024). The judiciary, the legislature, the executive, electoral commissions, and political parties should win the trust of the citizens to be well governed, the rule of law, and peaceful resolution of conflicts (Paleri, 2022). This may result in political inactivity and social instability, or even vulnerability to anti-democratic forces, when young people do not trust these establishments (Kiess, 2024). Therefore, the issue of factors that precondition the trust or distrust of university students to democratic institutions should be explored to improve the challenges to democratic stability and increase youth participation. The present study uses a mixed method in order to explore the relation between youth political engagement and confidence in democratic institutions among university students. The study will focus on determining trends, motivation, and barriers in terms of political participation and institutional trust by integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. It is also interested in knowing the socio-demographic factors that affect political attitudes and behaviors including gender, socioeconomic status and study field.

Conclusively, the two phenomena that are closely related with immense consequences to democratic governance and development include youth political participation and trust in the democratic institutions. Of great impact in this is the role played by the students of the university as a youth group whose participation in politics can determine the future of political trend. Through

research and pattern study of their participation as well as the level of trust particularly in destinations such as Pakistan, this research paper has added value to the overall discussion of the role of democratic resilience and youth empowerment. Their findings will enlighten policy makers, teachers even civil societies that may wish to promote active and inclusive youth participation in democracy.

## METHODOLOGY

The study design employed in this research is mixed-method to answer the study question to the fullest by exploring the problem of youth political engagement and the trust in university students in democratic institutions. A survey was administered to a representative sample of 400 students in various universities in order to receive quantitative information concerning their activities in the political engagement where they were requested to give information concerning voting, party affiliation, party activism, and digital participation, and the confidence they had in critical democratic institutions such as the parliament, the judiciary, and the election commission. The socio-demographic data that had been obtained during the survey consisted of age, gender, academic discipline, and socioeconomic status that were utilized in order to analyze the effects of the specified aspects on political attitudes. To substantiate the quantitative data, the qualitative one was also acquired by the means of semi-structured interviews with 20 selected students who would allow probing deeper into their own motivations, perceptions, and obstacles to political participation, as well as institutional trust. The thematic analysis of the transcripts of the interviews constituted the interpretation of the survey findings providing a contextual viewpoint. The data gathering ensured that data was gathered in three months and this was done to secure variety in the backgrounds of the participants in order to enhance generalizability of the findings. They were examined by statistical analysis, descriptive statistics and correlation analysis along with regression modeling to establish significant patterns and relationships and in the case of qualitative data, coding and the application of thematic analysis were performed. The research adhered to ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary involvement in the study.

## RESULTS

The article investigated the trends of political involvement and trust in democratic institutions among the students in the university. Four hundred students were surveyed, the gender composition was equal (52 female, 48 male) and including students of different academic fields.

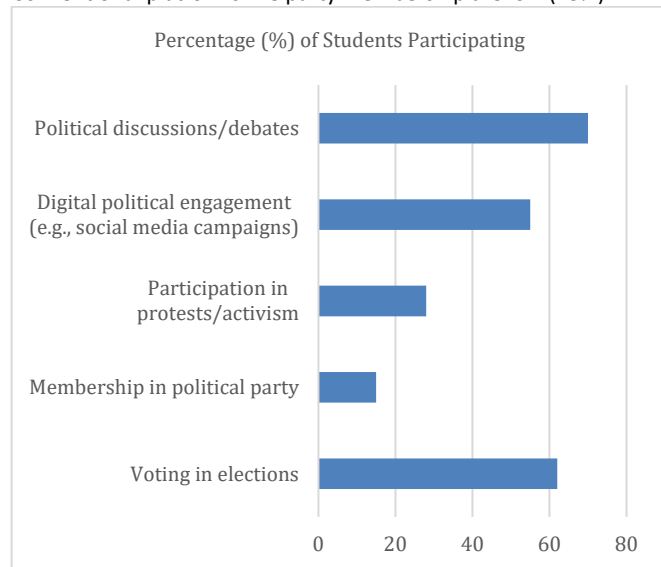
### 1. Political Participation Among Students

Table 1 summarizes the frequency of different types of political participation reported by students.

| Type of Participation                                       | Percentage (%) of Students Participating |
|---|--|
| Voting in elections   | 62                                       |
| Membership in political party                               | 15                                       |
| Participation in protests/activism                          | 28                                       |
| Digital political engagement (e.g., social media campaigns) | 55                                       |
| Political discussions/debates                               | 70                                       |

The statistics indicate that Voting is the most widespread type of political participation with 62 percent of students indicating that they had voted during the previous election. Online interaction is also common and 55% responded to online political participation.

Conventional platforms like party membership are low (15%).

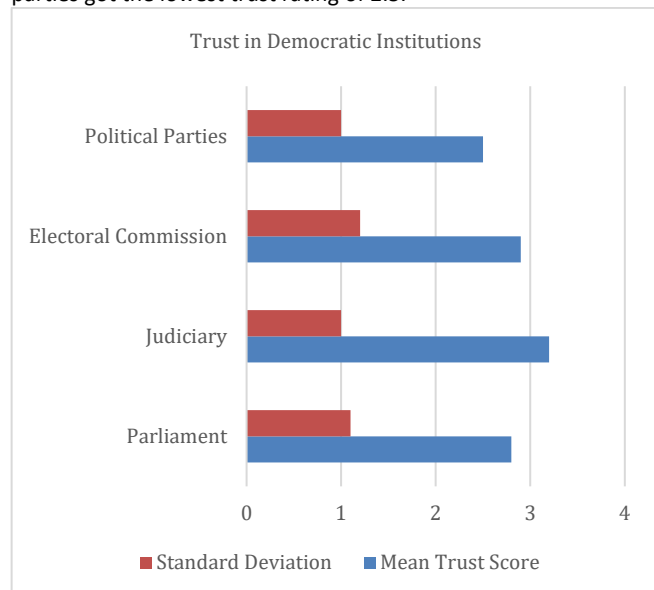


## 2. Trust in Democratic Institutions

Table 2 presents students' levels of trust in key democratic institutions on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = No trust, 5 = Complete trust).

| Institution          | Mean Trust Score | Standard Deviation |
|----------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Parliament           | 2.8              | 1.1                |
| Judiciary            | 3.2              | 1.0                |
| Electoral Commission | 2.9              | 1.2                |
| Political Parties    | 2.5              | 1.0                |

The results demonstrate moderate trust to low trust in all institutions, with the highest trust rating of 3.2 being judiciary which would depict a relatively high level of confidence whereas political parties got the lowest trust rating of 2.5.



## 3. Relationship Between Political Participation and Trust

Correlation analysis (Table 3) indicates a positive but weak relationship between trust in democratic institutions and political participation.

| Variable            | Political Participation Score |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Trust in Parliament | 0.28*                         |
| Trust in Judiciary  | 0.34*                         |

|                               |       |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| Trust in Electoral Commission | 0.22* |
| Trust in Political Parties    | 0.19* |

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Students who had a greater trust in democratic institutions were more likely to engage in political activities though the correlations imply that other factors have an impact on engagement.

## 4. Qualitative Insights

The most significant motivators and discouraging factors of participation were identified through interpretive codes (thematic analysis of 20 interviews with students). The students were outraged by the perceived corruption and inefficiency, yet, at the same time, hopeful of the future of youth political movements. Many individuals considered digital platforms to be critical tools of political expression, and students living in rural locations cited low internet connectivity rates as a major challenge.

## DISCUSSION

The outcome of the study gives a vivid picture of what the students of the university take part in the political process and how much they trust the democratic structures. Formal political involvement, namely membership of political parties, is very low although the majority of students indicated that they engaged in some form of political participation most specifically in: voting and online activism. This trend is an indicator of other trends of youths who are increasingly moving to other forms of political expression, such as on-line, as opposed to institutional acts. This trend of online interactions shows greater applicability of social media and technology in political mobilization among the youths.

The relatively low level of trust in democratic institutions in the present study is not out of place considering that previous studies had indicated that the youth lacked confidence in the political systems. The fact that the judiciary has a higher score on the trust dimension may be an indicator that they are not seen to be as partisan as the institutions that are more partisan such as parliaments and political parties. The positive relations (weak but significant) between the trust, participation and the fact that the increase of institutional transparency and accountability can assist the youth to become more a part of formal politics.

The qualitative data further illuminates the impediments faced by the students, e.g. corruption, inefficiency, and lack of representation, as a source of political disinterest and distrust. But the optimism of the statements drawn out with reference to the young-wave political movements, and to the possibility of the change suggests the presence of the untapped reservoir of civil strength. It means that the way to respond to increasing the political engagement levels should be to build trust and address the institutional issues that leave young voters uninterested. The other topic, which is also mentioned in the paper is the digital divide especially on the rural student population who are constrained by the infrastructural problems restricting their online expression of political issues. This gap has posed a challenge over the issue of equal political participation and also predetermined the need to devise mechanisms that will close the digital divide in an attempt to create democratic processes that are inclusive.

Altogether, these results confirm the central thesis that there is a complication of trust and political participation among students of higher education. They recommend the significance of multi-layered interventions, which foster the use of political education, institutional credibility, and on-line platforms in addressing the demands of the youth.

## CONCLUSION

It has also taught much about political behaviour and attitudes among students in the universities; a severely vital population in the future of democracy. Even though the degree of engagement is

moderate, the persistence of the distrust in the democratic institutions is a pressing challenge to sustainable youth involvement. Such a tendency of turning to digital and informal forms of participation is also a sign of the change in the nature of political participation but also leads to the consideration of the problem of the sufficient and inclusive access to technology.

The policymakers, schools and civil societies must work together to win back the trust of the people by enhancing transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of the democratic institutions. Besides, it is necessary to address the infrastructural challenges that limit the access to digital space especially in the rural areas to ensure that all young people will be able to become active political sphere members. Future research should examine changes in youth attitude as a longitudinal factor in relation to politics and impacts of interventions to increase levels of trust and participation. The democratic societies can utilize the youth power and ideas through the involvement and listening of the university students to come up with more responsive and resilient government systems.

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## Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines, with informed consent obtained from all participants and confidentiality strictly maintained.

## Data Availability

Available from corresponding author on request.

## Author Contributions

**Atiqah Mubeen:** Study design, data collection, statistical analysis, and drafting and writing of the manuscript.

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## Conflict of Interest

None.

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