

Perspectives of Young Adults in the Pursuit of a Political Career

**Ms. Bhagyashree Kulkarni¹, Maitreyee M. Deshpande²,
Aishiki Sadhukhan³**

¹HOD and Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Psychology, Institute of Forensic Science, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

^{2,3}Students, T.Y.B.Sc. (2023-24), Institute of Forensic Science, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

The evolving world of youth political engagement has consistently seized the spotlight in debates and discussion centring around the ostensible decline in interest in political activities and the potential consequences it entails on democracy and its future.

This study endeavours to dissect the perceived disinterest in pursuing political careers among young adults aged 16 to 30. In this regard this research addresses key factors, the absence of immediate and tangible rewards, a distrust in the political functioning and curtailed comprehension of complexities related to politics and challenges faced in representation in this field.

In this paper, researchers present an empirical pilot research, illuminating the perspectives of young adults in the persuasion of a political career, using a meticulously developed and administered inventory to a representative sample of 300 young adults. The inference of these outlooks and the correlation potential of the contributing factors are discussed aiming to deepen the sense of civic engagement and nurturing ambitious and knowledgeable representatives and political activists. Through these insights researchers avail a valuable resource to educators and policy makers to discern the challenges faced and guide focused interventions to increase political engagement.

Keywords: young adults; politics; career; challenges; complexity; rewards; political interest; Pearson's correlation

1. Introduction

Political interest and participation are the essential ingredients to nurture a representative democracy. However, this realm does not limit itself to voting, but highlights the pertinence of “high intensity political participation” [1], an activism involving voluntary engagement in activities such as campaigning and standing for elections. In recent years, youth have been put in the spotlight of the global stage for political participation. The dynamic factors shaping globalisation and the perpetually evolving socio-economic changes have considerably severed the connection between young adults and traditional political concerns [2]. This has resulted in a pervasive feeling of dissatisfaction and impassivity among this demographic. Consequently, governing institutions and influential bodies have taken note of this transition, evoking reservations about its potential impact, especially its threat to the perceived inclusivity of the country's democracy [3]. Looking at the Indian context, in the analysis of the two general elections, (2014,2019) a

trend in political candidacy of youth citizens is noticed. In 2014, 587 of the 8163 electoral candidates analysed belonged to the age bracket of 25-30 years of age [4]. Out of the 542 elected officials, 12 members belonged to this age range [5].

In 2019, a slight increase of participation by this fraction is seen, where 658 of the candidates belong to the age bracket of 25-30 years old out of the 7928 candidates analysed [6]. While the elected officials belonging to this age range were 9 out of 539 [7].

In comparison, the population of the youth fraction (ages 15-29) in the country increased from 222.7 million in 1991 to 333.4 million in 2011 and is projected to reach 371.4 million by 2021, i.e. the upcoming consensus [8].

As is evident, for an increase in representation, participation in political affairs needs to be increased. What factors influence the decision to or not to pursue political activism in one's young years? The thought process involved in choosing a political career mirrors the contemplation involved in other career decisions. In the contemplation of any seminal decision, an individual meticulously conducts comprehensive risk assessment as elucidated by the Rational Actor Theory. This cognitive schema is applicable to the aspect of political engagement, where the perceived necessity for societal reform and other aspirations may push towards active involvement. Contingent upon an initial positive attitude, anticipated benefits dictate the future participation. The internalised determinant of an individual's self-efficacy, is a prominent contributor in the process of cost assessment. The individual's realisation of empowerment enables continued interest; despite its limited direct correlation with decision to participate. For this realisation to occur, former participation or exposure is required.

Cognitive engagement theory asserts that, despite the influence of supplementary factors, the depth of subject knowledge, gained through a variety of channels, positively correlates with one's substantial interest in the subject matter. In this context, the availability and accessibility to resources and the active engagement of the individual in various communities is directly associated with their level of participation [3]. Both these theoretical models underscore the importance of being exposed to political activism and having access to the resources required for meaningful participation. An introduction, through schooling or family and peers, may aid in learning about the necessity and prospects of political processes leading to a positive outlook and development of a political belief system which may occur in various pathways. It is posited that the beliefs and interests cultivated during formative years persist unchanged throughout an individual's lifespan. Conversely, an alternative model underscores the fluidity of these perspectives, acknowledging their capacity to evolve in response to shifts in an individual's circumstances. In the context of young individuals, limited exposure to political discourse is presumed due to preoccupations with educational or work-related commitments [9]. As individuals progress through various stages of life, from adolescence to career initiation, their circumstances advance, influencing their interest and inclusion in state affairs. At the outset, educational institutes and families play a vital role in cultivating the development of political perspectives and comprehension of ideologies. For example, academic institutions nurture an interest in politics among students, offering opportunities for engagement through platforms like student organization and debate clubs. Similarly, one's professional environment can either encourage active participation in political unions or contribute to a sense of disengagement from the political realm [10].

The prerequisite understanding of political functioning, that a person may not have the accessible means to acquire in their formative years, may contribute to ambivalence. As evidenced in the study conducted by Matt Henn, et. al., (2012), a considerable portion of young participants expressed uncertainty regarding

their comprehension of democratic processes, with a distinct scepticism about their capacity to exert influence within these processes, consequently fostering a sense of disinclination. Nevertheless, their confidence in the democratic process and its outcomes by appreciating its role in upholding accountability and transparency creates a positive constitution. On the other side of the coin, stakeholders in this process, including administrative bodies, politicians, and affiliated parties, command limited trust within this demographic, perceived primarily as being driven by electoral interests rather than a genuine representation of public concerns. Despite these reservations, such issues spark discussions on political matters within peer groups and families.

The diverse approaches of engaging in political pursuits have also harboured divisions. The examination of contemporary political activism through the lens of traditional political processes offers a constrained perspective. The definitions that were applicable in the past may not carry the same weight today, given the increasing diversity and addition of subjects that were not previously included. The juxtaposition of cause-oriented initiatives, addressing specific concerns, against activities like voting, party affiliation, or citizen-centric activism contributes significantly to the understanding of participation in present times. Presently, methods such as protests, boycotts, vocal dissent, and non-compliance, often blending current and traditional approaches, are employed in the pursuit of today's critical issues. Notably, these cause-driven endeavours also seek to hold both private sector establishments and governing bodies accountable, elevating social responsibility standards. Political issues relevant to younger citizens, though categorised as such, are frequently ostracised from formal political discussions, embedding a sense of alienation and disengagement. Another catalyst for the transformation in political expression is the pivotal role played by decentralised institutions in political affairs due to non-traditional figures holding the power, a result of adaptation to modern socialisation methods [10].

Modern social theory posits that effective governance of social conduct cannot be confined to rigid conventions. The disputes arising from the seemingly sudden breakdown of previously perceived fixed definitions have fuelled the rise of cause-oriented activism, a domain distinct from the prevalent forms of political involvement [2].

While dominant political ideologies may play a role in compartmentalising complex issues, they hold minimal sway for young people. Instead, they embrace volatile and individualistic identities, forging experimental paths beyond traditional political frameworks. This under-representation of pertinent issues within formal democratic institutions compromises their relevance to younger generations, further widening the schism through evolving and volatile social interactions in communities. Such socialisation is heavily influenced by media portrayals of political processes, serving as the primary information source for many young people. The constant barrage of negativity surrounding political discourse, as depicted in the media, may reinforce their pre-existing scepticism, which is then directed to blame the younger generations for their supposed apathy and distant behaviour. However, this scepticism does not signify a rejection of political commitment, but rather ventures into redefining political expression through transformative methods of socialisation [2], where the resources used to exert influence have lessened, and the reach has increased, presenting a society where the individuals can address the concerns and the establishments involved, directly and at any instant, increasing transparency and representation. However, this connection is not deemed to be influential or participatory by traditional political establishments. This transition and the reasons behind it are often overlooked leading to misinterpretations of contemporary political

engagement as disengagement or apathy, creating a divide, which in turn is seen as exclusion by the young adults.

Along with the development of interest in political affairs and its expression, another component influencing pursuit is the immense friction encountered initially. From a vantage point, establishing and sustaining a network to impact decision-making seems daunting to a young adult. More often, the candidates in political activism are of higher occupational status, with abundance of network and resources within reach. This observed phenomenon may stem from substantial investment coupled with meagre tangible rewards in exchange for a laborious and time-consuming process. Sustaining such operations over an extended period is feasible primarily for individuals with considerable resources and extensive connections. Furthermore, the volatility of the field fails to instil confidence in committing such resources, leading to the predominant participation of individuals belonging to a specific demographic group [12].

The issue of gender disparity is also of concern, to which female activists, as can be anticipated, have a deeper awareness against. This can be imputed to the established societal structures and the caregiving responsibilities expected from women in addition to their work. Both roles are expected to be fulfilled and tested upon, where competence in one is contingent upon the other. These institutional barriers are incommensurate with the relatively fewer challenges faced by men and are often arduous to overcome [13]. Correspondingly, obstacles of similar kind are faced by those of the diverse sectors, creating a vicious cycle wherein under-representation leads to the diminished motivation for political engagement in these sectors.

How can this existing divide be resolved to mitigate disengagement and its misinterpretation? Moreover, what determinants can be focused upon to prosper involvement in doubtful citizens for a flourishing representative democracy? In this research, researchers aim to assess the notion that youth show a disinterest in pursuing a career in politics, and whether factors like lack of understanding of complexities of politics, perception of politics as an untrustworthy field, preference for fields with immediate tangible rewards and challenges regarding restrictions and representation faced in the field of politics, contribute in their decision.

2. Method:

The sampling process used a survey-based approach and featured a self-developed inventory. To analyse the data, researchers utilised Pearson's correlation coefficient to statistically ascertain relations between the variables.

3. Participants:

With a specific focus on the youth cohort, the age range considered spanned from 16 to 30 years old. A random sampling approach was employed, resulting in the collection of 164 samples through online channels to broaden the sample pool and 136 samples through offline channels, from institutions, railway trains and hostels, located primarily in Mumbai. In total, 300 samples were gathered for a comprehensive analysis.

4. Materials:

An inventory was developed which included 40 items relating to the contributory factors in political disengagement. Each item had a response of 5 alternatives, Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree and

Strongly Disagree, allowing the participants to appropriately range their response. The details collected from the participants were age, gender, occupation primarily.

The inventory was structured in 4 sections, namely, Comprehending Complexities, Perceptual Inadequacies, Tangible rewards, and Challenges to emphasise each factor and elicit nuanced responses from the participants.

5. Result

The Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to draw a relationship between the ages of the participants and the corresponding factors that have been measured in this research. This formula assumes an independent and a dependent variable, here, age being the independent variable and the factors being the dependent variable.

1. Comprehending complexities

According to the calculation, Pearson's correlation coefficient between ages of 16-30 and their ability to discern the elaborateness of a career in politics was found to be -0.09. This reflects a relatively weak and a negative linear relationship between the two variables. The association between them is almost negligible, but there is a marginal tendency for the individuals' understanding of the complexity of the topic to decrease as they age.

2. Perceptual inadequacies

A score of -0.09 in Pearson's correlation coefficient between the paucity in apprehending the field and the age of the individual's indicate a notable faint, adverse linear association. This signifies that with an increase in age, there is a slight inclination for these inadequacies to lessen.

3. Tangible rewards

Within the context of this research, with age of the participants acting as the independent variable and the tangible rewards offered by a political career as the dependent variable, the Pearson's correlation coefficient produced a value of -0.007. This extremely weak score demonstrates the almost inconspicuous relation among the variables; that is, age does not appear to influence the desire for a career with tangible rewards in young adults. For people above and below this age group, their beliefs and desires persist, remaining the same.

4. Challenges

Assuming the challenges faced by individuals with regards to their age and gender as the dependent variable and their age as the independent variable, the Pearson's correlation coefficient yielded a value of 0.05. This denotes a relatively weak yet positive interrelation between the two variables. This suggests that, on average, as age increases, there are minor chances for the challenges as perceived and encountered by young adults and women in a political career to increase. Numerous other factors may contribute to the perceived challenges in the political career context for young adults and women, nonetheless there is assent in the sampled young adults of the requirement of attention towards this field as an opportunity.

6. Discussion

Aforementioned results show a feeble association, positive or negative, between the factors highlighted and the perception of political activism as a profession. However, this does not account to the disregard to consider politics as a vocation by young adults.

It is also of note that specific inventory items, directly associated with the factor in question, yielded concordant results. Young adults, as shown by the responses, are more likely to not participate in political

discussions, and believe that attaining comprehensive understanding of state affairs is arduous. It was also noted that majority of the sampled population agreed of the sentiment that the media portrayal and public image of the elected official is of more emphasis than their ideologies, however there is also majority agreement to the belief that elected officials are more prone to criticism than other public figures. The view that the rewards in a political career are delayed and uncertain was held by the majority of the sampled youth population. Altogether, these perspectives were eminent in the decision of pursuing politics as a career. It is evident as according to the responses, and as can be anticipated that schooling influences the choice of profession the most.

There is a general agreement that there has been neglect towards awareness of politics as an opportunity for a career in public service. This discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that many individuals in this age range have minimal exposure to political events and processes and hence overlook the opportunities to explore aspects of vocations related to this field. This predisposition affects the resolution of challenges for various sectors and trickles further to under-representation.

Considering all viewpoints, while age may show a weak correlation with the factors mentioned, it is discernible from the responses, the formative influence of early education with regards to functioning of state affairs and the roles in which involvement is a matter of personal interest, is imperative in the decision to choose a profession.

Limitations and future research-

Since the participants were approached in public spaces with no prior relations to them, they were more likely to develop courtesy bias while filling the inventory. This refers to when an individual gives positive feedback but refrains from giving any negative feedback, which may lead to lack of variability in the responses collected as individual's avoid expressing their dissent opinions. This diminishes the diversity of the data, limiting the researchers' ability to capture a broad spectrum of responses.

Acquiescence bias is another form of bias that usually affects research participants where they tend to answer the item by agreeing to it, causing a lack of in-depth reflection of their own thought and opinions on the matter. It makes it obscure whether the relation observed between two variables are genuine or not. As this inventory was time-consuming and involved a lot of active intellectual thinking, neutral responding bias can also be expected. The respondents can directly choose the 'Neutral' response without thinking much about the item as they might be on a time-crunch, they are unable to choose an option or are unable to comprehend the item.

Further research could focus on specific concepts that can be introduced in the education curriculum, beyond what is primarily directed, to inculcate a sense of civic engagement in this demographic early on. Influential elements, specific and imperative to certain demographics, holding principal weight in an individual's occupation-related decisions, can be examined upon. Insights into values, factors and circumstances driving activists in their political involvement and how these values and factors can impel young adults to pursue a political career, may be explored in further research.

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