

Political Participation Among University Students in Kenya:

Current Status, Barriers and the Path to Inclusion



Study Report

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About the International Relations Students Association of Kenya (IRSAK)

The International Relations Students Association of Kenya (IRSAK) is movement of young international relations students and professionals dedicated to intellectual discourse, research and policy engagement. IRSAK fosters a platform for students and young international relations practitioners to develop expertise in international affairs through webinars, workshops, conferences, roundtables and research initiatives. The association seeks to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical application in international relations.

Contents

Acknowledgement	iii
List of Acronyms	iv
Executive Summary	v
Chapter One: Introduction and Background	1
1.0 Introduction	1
1.2 Problem Statement	7
1.3 Research Objectives	8
1.4 Justification	8
1.5 Scope of the Study	8
Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework	9
Social Learning Theory	9
Situational Theory of Publics	10
Chapter Three: Methodology	12
3.1 Data Collection and Analysis	12
3.2 Study Area	13
3.3 Study Population	13
3.4 Sample Size Determination and Sampling Procedure	13
3.5 Ethical Considerations	15
3.6 Limitations of the Study	15
Chapter Four: Findings	17
4.1 Demographic Characteristics	17
4.2 An Assessment of the Level of Political Awareness and Participation Among University Students	18
4.3 Hindrances to Active Political Participation Among University Students	21
4.4 The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Awareness and Participation Among Students	25
4.5 Strategies for Enhancing Political Engagement Among University Students	27
Chapter Five: Conclusion	29
References	30
Annex	31
Annex 1: Survey Questions	31
Annex 2: Focus Group Discussion Questions	36
Annex 3: Key Informant Interview Questions	37

Figures

Figure 1: University of Colombia students protesting (Photo credits: The New York Times)	2
Figure 2: Blindfolded American hostage surrounded by captors outside the U.S. embassy in Tehrān, November 9, 1979 (Photo credits: Unknown)	3
Figure 3: Demonstrators hold Kurdish flags and portraits of jailed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan during a gathering to celebrate Norouz in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir on March 21, 2013 (Photo credit: Reuters)	4
Figure 4: In the spring of 1989, more than one million Chinese students and workers occupied Beijing's Tiananmen Square and began the largest political protest in communist China's history. Six weeks of protests ended with the Beijing massacre of 3-4 June (Photo credits: Getty Images)	5
Figure 5: Students protesting in Prague in 1989 (Photo credits: New York Times)	6
Figure 6: Youth protesting in Nairobi during the "Saba Saba" protests	7
Figure 7: Pie-chart depicting respondent's gender	17
Figure 8: Pie-chart depicting respondents age group	17
Figure 9: Pie-chart depicting respondents field of study	18
Figure 10: Bargraph depicting level of awareness of elected leaders among respondents	18
Figure 11: Pie-chart depicting awareness of the NYC among respondents	19
Figure 12: Pie chart depicting awareness of political manifestos among the respondents	19
Figure 13: Pie-chart depicting voter registration status among respondents	20
Figure 14: Pie-chart depicting voter behavior in the last general election	20
Figure 15: Pie-chart depicting voter behavior in the coming general election	20
Figure 16: Pie-chart depicting political party membership among respondents	21
Figure 17: Pie-chart depicting participation in the anti-finance bill protests	21
Figure 18: Bar graph of responses on whether politicians care about the youth on a scale of 1-3 (1-Strongly Agree 2-Neutral 3-Strongly disagree)	22
Figure 19: Bar graph of responses on whether politicians are corrupt on a scale of 1-3 (1-Strongly Agree 2-Neutral 3- Strongly Disagree)	22
Figure 20: Pie-chart on voter behavior for the coming general election among respondents	23
Figure 21: Pie-chart on respondents preferred platform for civic education	26
Figure 22: Pie-chart on respondent's knowledge on the protests they participated in	26
Figure 23: Pie-chart on the respondent's primary source of knowledge about the Finance bill	26
Figure 24: Pie-chart on the respondent's preferred platform for civic education	27

Tables

Table 1: List of Key Informant Interviewees	14
Table 2: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) schedule of University Students	14

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List of Acronyms

AU	African Union
CUEA	Catholic University of Eastern Africa
KII	Key Informant Interview
IEBC	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
JKUAT	Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
MCA	Members of County Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament

Executive Summary

A majority of university students exhibit low levels of active political participation, especially in areas such as voting and political party membership

Youth participation in politics is a cornerstone of democratic development and effective governance. In Kenya, university students represent a vital segment of the youth population with the potential to influence political discourse, policy direction, and leadership renewal. However, evidence suggests a persistent pattern of political disengagement among this group. This study, therefore, examined the level of political awareness and participation among university students in Kenya, the hindrances to their active engagement, and the role of social media in shaping their political attitudes and involvement. The study also aimed to propose practical strategies to enhance political participation within university spaces. The research was guided by four specific objectives which include; i) To assess the level of political awareness and participation among university students; ii. To identify the hindrances to active political participation among university students; iii. To explore the role of social media in influencing political participation and awareness among students; and iv) To propose strategies for enhancing political engagement among university students.

The study was premised on the understanding that a disengaged youth population weakens democratic structures and governance outcomes, as political decisions are left to a limited portion of the population. By investigating the factors that influence youth political participation and awareness, this study sought to provide evidence-based recommendations to strengthen civic engagement and ensure that young people play a meaningful role in shaping Kenya's democratic future.

Geographically, the study covered universities across Kenya's major regions—Central, Rift Valley, Nyanza, Western, Eastern, Coast, and Nairobi—excluding North Eastern. This broad coverage ensured a diverse representation of social, cultural, and institutional contexts. The respondents comprised undergraduate students from various disciplines, with deliberate consideration of gender and academic year balance. The study focused on the period between 2022 and 2025 and drew from both primary data and secondary sources, including literature, policy documents, and institutional frameworks relevant to youth political participation. Through surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews, the study provided insights into the political perceptions, engagement levels, and influencing factors among university students. It further analyzed the impact of digital platforms in mobilizing and informing young voters and examined institutional barriers to sustained political participation. The study makes the following key findings:

- ❑ A sizeable proportion of university students demonstrate moderate levels of political awareness, particularly regarding their elected leaders and the manifestos of major political parties.

- ❑ A majority of university students exhibit low levels of active political participation, especially in areas such as voting and political party membership.
- ❑ Despite limited participation and prevailing skepticism, most university students express a willingness to vote in future elections, even though they have low levels of trust in the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC).
- ❑ The study reveals a widespread distrust of politicians and key political institutions, including the IEBC and political parties, among university students.
- ❑ Social media platforms play an increasingly significant role in shaping political awareness, disseminating information, and facilitating mobilization and civic education among university students.

These findings underscore the need for multi-stakeholder interventions—by universities, government institutions, civil society, and youth-led organizations—to foster a politically conscious and participatory generation capable of advancing Kenya's democratic and developmental

Chapter One

Introduction and Background

1.0 Introduction

Historically, university students have been powerful agents of change—both positively and negatively—across governance and other spheres of society. Across continents and through various periods in history, they have engaged in struggles for reform, often risking, and at times losing their lives in the pursuit of justice and better governance. One of the most active periods of university student involvement in politics and governance was between the 1960s and the 1990s, when student movements across the world became powerful forces for reform and resistance. During this era, students challenged authoritarian governance, colonial legacies, war, and social injustice, often playing a catalytic role in political change. In the United States for instance, the 1968 student-led protests at Columbia University reflected broader mobilizations against the Vietnam War, racial inequality, and repressive university policies. In Asia, the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in China highlighted student demands for democracy and political freedoms, while in Iran, university students spearheaded the 1979 U.S. Embassy hostage crisis, symbolizing the revolutionary fervor that toppled the Shah. Similarly, in Turkey, the emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the late 1970s had roots in radical student activism, where universities became breeding grounds for ideological mobilization. In Europe, student activism was central to the 1968 Paris protests that reshaped French society and to the 1989 Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, where students joined civil society in dismantling communist rule. In Africa, student movements were equally transformative: in South Africa, the 1976 Soweto Uprising marked a decisive moment in the anti-apartheid struggle; in Nigeria, students mobilized in the late 1980s against military rule and economic crises; while in Kenya, university students were pivotal in the 1990s pro-democracy protests that pressured the state to embrace multipartism.

However, in recent times, there has been a notable decline in student political engagement over the years, including in Kenya. This in part reflected in the reduced number of social movements that seek to challenge key governance deficiencies.

1.1 Case studies of Notable University Student's Movements (1960's-90's)

1968 student-led protests at Columbia University

The Columbia University protests of 1968 were a series of student-led demonstrations that reflected broader social and political unrest in the United States during the 1960s. The protests began in the spring of 1968 when students became aware of the university's connections with the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), a research organization that provided support for the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. This discovery fueled student outrage over the university's perceived complicity in military research and the broader war effort. In addition to anti-war concerns, students protested against a controversial plan to construct a new gymnasium in Morningside Park, which they argued would be racially segregated, effectively limiting access for residents of the predominantly Black Harlem neighborhood adjacent to the campus. These issues together highlighted the students' frustration with university governance, lack of transparency,

and social inequities. In response, students organized sit-ins and occupied several university buildings, including Hamilton Hall and other administrative offices, effectively shutting down parts of the campus. The occupation escalated tensions between the students and university authorities, culminating in a violent intervention by the New York City Police Department (NYPD), which led to numerous arrests and injuries.

Despite the confrontations, the protests achieved significant victories. The university abandoned the segregated gymnasium project and also disaffiliated from the IDA, signaling a rejection of direct involvement in military research tied to the Vietnam War. Beyond these immediate outcomes, the protests became a defining moment in student activism, inspiring broader movements against war, institutional racism, and the unaccountable authority of universities across the United States.

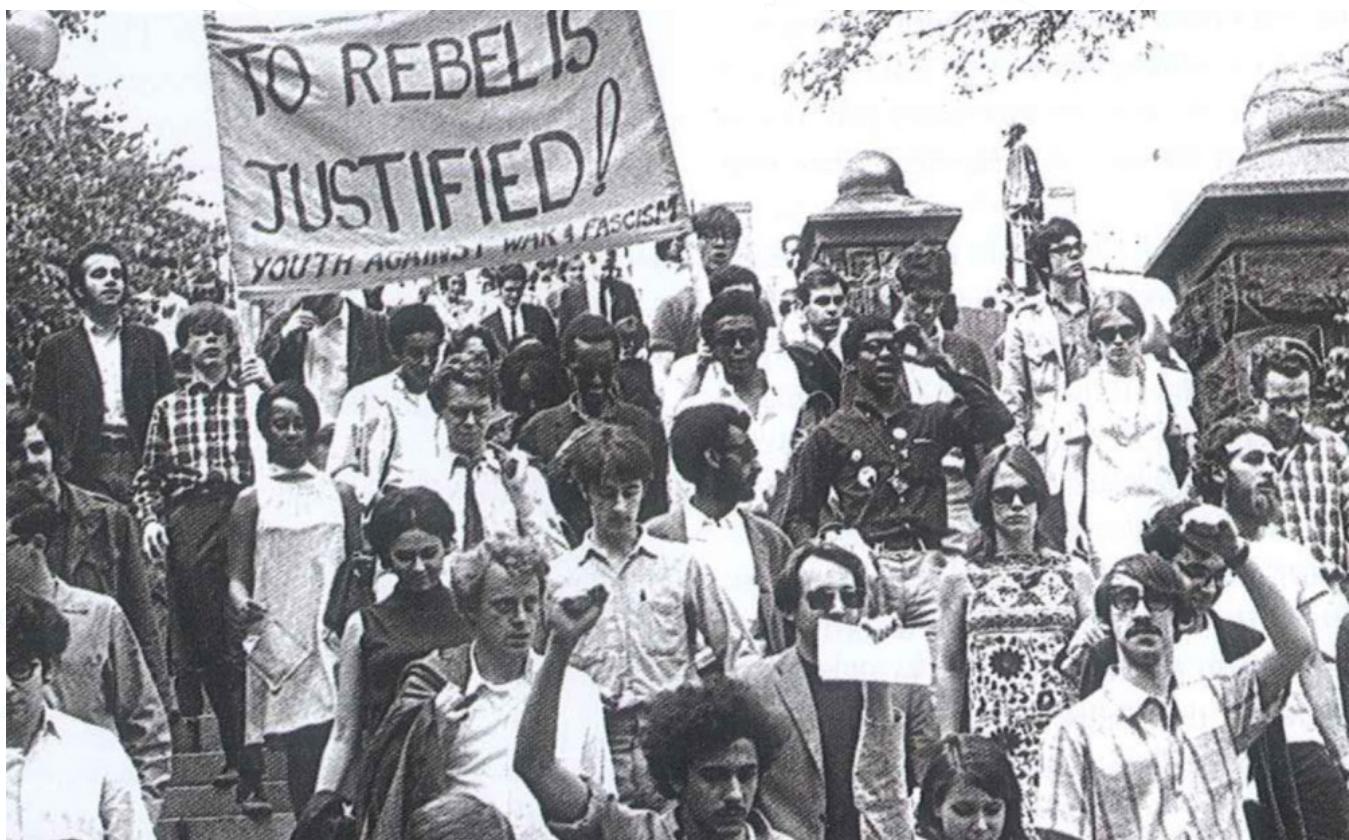


Figure 1: University of Colombia students protesting (Photo credits: The New York Times)

1979 Iranian Hostage Crisis

The 1979 Iranian Hostage Crisis was a pivotal diplomatic standoff between Iran and the United States, lasting from November 4, 1979, to January 20, 1981. The crisis began when a group of Iranian university students, calling themselves the *Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line*, stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took 66 American diplomats and citizens hostage (Bowden, 2006). The act was motivated by resentment over decades of U.S. support for the ousted Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and fears of a possible U.S.-backed coup similar to that of 1953 (Hiro, 2013).

University students were central to both the initiation and sustenance of the crisis. They meticulously planned the embassy takeover as a symbolic act of resistance against American interference and as a way to solidify the newly established Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini (Takeyh, 2009). The students framed their actions as a continuation of Iran's revolutionary struggle, portraying themselves

as defenders of national sovereignty. Their control of the embassy and hostages not only embarrassed the U.S. government but also strengthened the radical factions of the Iranian revolution, marginalizing moderates and consolidating theocratic power (Sick, 1985).

The hostage crisis lasted 444 days and ended only after the signing of the Algiers Accords. However, the role of university students in orchestrating and maintaining the occupation remains one of the most significant examples of student-driven political action in modern history.



Figure 2: Blindfolded American hostage surrounded by captors outside the U.S. embassy in Tehran, November 9, 1979 (Photo credits: Unknown)

1970's emergence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)

The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was established as a follow up to the military coup in 1971 that suppressed leftist and Kurdish parties. This was during an era when most public political spaces were grossly limited and most activists were imprisoned. The rural/working class students, who were enrolled in Ankara on government scholarships, ended up being the principal actors. It was under this condition of repression and restricted political room that Kurdistan Workers' Party started to form, and party members termed the years 1973-1978 as the existential period of the party. Because of the suppression, which was still being experienced, the political discussions and organization moved into the private spheres such as student flats, apartments and houses. University dormitories, canteens and associations could be useful in recruiting but were not a secure working environment.

The movement leveraged extensively on student networks in Ankara where university life offered both a means of recruitment as well as a secure avenue of political discourse. In addition to recruitment, these student groups were laboratories in which political thought developed and an ideology unique to the anarchic and frequently sectional leftist parties of that period developed out of daily meetings

and debate. By their cautious deployment of private student spaces to protect themselves against state surveillance; and by their own organizational approach, the Kurdistan Revolutionaries became more and more an organized movement which would one day be called the PKK. Therefore, what started as student-led discussions within student apartments in Ankara later formed into one of the biggest revolutionary movements in the Middle East.



Figure 3: Demonstrators hold Kurdish flags and portraits of jailed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan during a gathering to celebrate Norouz in the southeastern Turkish city of Diyarbakir on March 21, 2013 (Photo credit: Reuters)

1989 Tiananmen Square protests

The Tiananmen Square Crackdown protests, also known as the June 4 Incident, was a student-led demonstration in Tiananmen Square; Beijing, China. The protests came about as a following the death of Hu Yaobang, the General Secretary of Chinese Communist Party(CCP) in April 1989 amidst a rapid economic struggle, massive inflation, political greed, nepotism, limited preparedness of graduates for the new economy, restriction on political participation as well as the rise of the Third wave democracy. The death of Hu Yaobang reflected the anxieties among the people and political elite about the country's future. Despite being highly disorganized and with varied goals, the students called for sustainable jobs and occupations, institutional accountability, constitutional due process, democracy, freedom of expression and the freedom for the press. The students revolted to hunger-strike, rioting, occupying the Tiananmen Square, sit-ins as well as civil disobedience. They got support from around the country, further spreading into 400 cities. The state council later introduced a martial law and more than 300,000 troops were deployed to confront the protestors which left both sides injured. On 1 June 1989, a meeting was held by the CCP leaders which came to a conclusion of cleaning the Square, three days later, the troops advanced into the central parts of Beijing in the morning hours which led to thousands dead and thousands injured. The events of 4 June 1989 marked a significant change in China. The reaction

to the protests set limits on the political expression in China that have lasted till date. Some consider it a patriotic move while others a revolution against the government. This event remains one of the most sensitive and restricted topics in China and even protest movements are even considered a taboo.



Figure 4: In the spring of 1989, more than one million Chinese students and workers occupied Beijing's Tiananmen Square and began the largest political protest in communist China's history. Six weeks of protests ended with the Beijing massacre of 3-4 June (Photo credits: Getty Images)

1989 Velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 was a non-violent uprising in Czechoslovakia that led to the collapse of the Communist regime and the establishment of a democratic government. Sparked by decades of political repression and economic stagnation, the revolution began on November 17, 1989, with a student-led demonstration in Prague to commemorate International Students' Day and the 50th anniversary of the Nazi suppression of Czech universities in 1939 (Wolchik, 1991).

University students played a critical role in initiating and sustaining the revolution. The peaceful march in Prague, organized by the student group *Svaz vysokoškolského studentstva* (Union of University Students), quickly escalated after police used force to disperse the demonstrators, injuring many and sparking public outrage (Skilling, 1991). Following this event, students declared a strike and called for broader civic engagement, coordinating with opposition groups such as the Civic Forum led by Václav Havel (Williams, 1997). University campuses became centers for political dialogue, mobilization, and dissemination of uncensored information, fueling nationwide protests that culminated in the resignation of the Communist leadership by late December 1989.

The contribution of university students to the Velvet Revolution went beyond protest; they acted as catalysts for national solidarity, employing non-violent resistance strategies and building bridges

between intellectual circles, workers, and the general public. Their activism not only accelerated the downfall of the regime but also underscored the transformative power of youth-led movements in political change.



Figure 5: Students protesting in Prague in 1989 (Photo credits: New York Times)

1990 Prodemocracy student movements in Kenya

In the 1990s, Kenya witnessed a vibrant pro-democracy movement that challenged the entrenched one-party rule system in Kenya, which was imposed by the then President Daniel Moi in 1982. Since then, university students, alongside civil society groups, religious leaders, and opposition politicians, played a central role in pushing for political liberalization. Student movements, particularly the Students of Nairobi University (SONU), played an active role in pushing for multipartism among other governance reforms. SONU was not merely a campus-based student union as it functioned as a radical political pressure group that consistently confronted state authoritarianism. In the build up to and during the prodemocracy movement in 1990, SONU's role was multi-faceted. First, it mobilized university students into street protests and demonstrations, which directly challenged government policies, corruption, and repression. Second, it served as an intellectual hub, producing pamphlets, speeches, and debates that linked Kenya's struggles with wider global liberation movements. Third, SONU built alliances with opposition politicians, trade unions, and civil society organizations, amplifying calls for multiparty democracy and constitutional change.

The organization's activism contributed significantly to the repeal of Section 2A in 1991, paving the way for multiparty politics. It also kept alive a culture of dissent during periods of intense repression, ensuring that democratic ideals remained part of the national discourse. However, SONU's influence began to wane in the 2000s, partly due to state co-optation, internal divisions, and the commercialization of student politics. To date, SONU's legacy is critical as it highlights the power of student activism in

national reform processes. The movement also influenced how Kenya was perceived abroad, with the student-led struggle reinforcing international pressure on the Moi regime to liberalize politically.



Figure 6: Youth protesting in Nairobi during the "Saba Saba" protests

1.2 Problem Statement

As highlighted through the various examples across the 1960's to the 90's, university students across the world were involved in pushing for various governance reforms and in challenging key political ideologies that their respective governments stood for.

Currently, political engagement with the demographic with the government has largely been reduced to campus-based issues such as student welfare, leadership disputes and resource allocation (i.e HELB). This stands in sharp contrast to the 60's and 90's where political engagement among university students was centred on issues of national governance. This narrowing of focus is harmful as it risks creating a generation that is disinterested in mainstream politics and national governance. In turn, leaving political decision-making to a smaller, less representative demographic poses significant dangers to Kenya's democratic institutions. A democracy thrives when a broad and diverse segment of the population actively participates in shaping governance. When young people—who form the country's largest demographic—withdraw from meaningful engagement, the result is a concentration of political influence in the hands of a small demographic or political elite.

The hypothesis of low political participation among the university students in Kenya, which this study seeks to investigate, is based on the following indicators: the level of awareness students have of their elected leaders and political party manifestos; the extent of their membership and activity in political parties; voter registration and actual turnout; participation in public consultation processes such as bill reviews; and engagement in street protests on key national issues. Examining these indicators provides

a structured way to assess the depth and dimensions of political participation among university students in Kenya.

1.3 Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this research study were to;

- i. To assess the level of political awareness and participation among university students
- ii. To identify the hindrances to active political participation among university students
- iii. To explore the role of social media in influencing political participation and awareness among students.
- iv. To propose strategies for enhancing political engagement among university students

1.4 Justification

This study is necessary to understand political participation among university students and develop strategies to encourage their participation in governance. A disengaged youth population weakens democratic structures, as decisions are left to a small segment of the population that actively participates in elections and governance. By assessing the level of political awareness and participation, and the hindrances to active political participation among the university students, this study aims to provide recommendations for reversing this trend and ensuring that young people play a significant role in shaping the country's future.

1.5 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on assessing the level of political awareness and participation, the role of social media in influencing political participation and awareness and the hindrances to active political participation. Geographically, the study covers universities located across the regions of Central, Rift Valley, Nyanza, Western, Eastern, Coast and Nairobi, with the exception of North Eastern. This wide regional coverage ensures that the findings reflect the diverse social, cultural, and institutional contexts that characterize Kenya's university landscape.. The respondents primarily include undergraduate students drawn from various disciplines, with attention given to gender balance and year of study. In terms of time, the scope of the study is limited to the period between 2022 and 2025. The study also draws on existing literature, policy frameworks, and institutional mechanisms that influence youth political participation within this timeframe.

When young people—who form the country's largest demographic—withdraw from meaningful engagement, the result is a concentration of political influence in the hands of a small demographic or political elite

Chapter Two

Theoretical Framework

Students who recognize political issues but perceive high constraints or low personal relevance often choose not to participate

Understanding political apathy among university students requires a nuanced approach that integrates psychological theories with empirical evidence. This section discusses key psychological and interdisciplinary frameworks that explain the lack of political engagement among students, drawing on peer-reviewed literature and journal sources. Despite various literary works on the theoretical underpinning of the subject matter, this paper will focus on two principal theories that best align with the findings presented herein.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that behaviours are learned through observing others, particularly in social contexts. According to Albert Bandura (1977), people can learn behaviors simply by observation regardless of whether or not they had direct experience or reinforcement. Individuals learn how models behave and then imitate those actions, Bandura coins this concept as observational learning or modeling. According to the theory there are four key processes of observational learning that must be met for effective modelling to occur as follows: 1) The observer must pay attention to the model of behavior. 2) The observer must remember what they saw. 3) The observer must be capable of reproducing or performing the behavior. 4) The observer must have a reason to imitate the behavior.

In addition to this, Bandura explains that people do not need to experience rewards or punishments directly to learn. He coined this phenomenon as vicarious reinforcement, where people can learn vicariously by seeing others being rewarded or punished for their actions. This observation influences whether they choose to adapt similar behaviors. Vicarious reinforcement offers a compelling lens through which to understand political apathy among university students. If politically apathetic behaviours are normalized within a student's peer group or educational environment, such attitudes are likely to be imitated. In addition to this, although the population of this study has had limited or no direct experience with the electoral process, they have witnessed the unfavorable outcomes and disillusionment experienced by older generations (negative reinforcement), thereby shaping their own attitudes toward political participation. Uyanne, Olokooba, and Agubosi (2022) in their study of youth incivility as a correlate of political apathy among undergraduates in University of Ilorin, Kwara State; observed that youth incivility and disengagement were socially transmitted, reinforcing a cycle of political apathy. Based on their study, students observe uncivil behaviors both in their environment and in society that shape their attitudes toward authority and civic engagement. Their study also echoes how vicarious reinforcement has heavily influenced the political disengagement of the youth.

In addition to voting behavior, Bandura's social learning theory would also offer an appropriate construct of other aspects of political participation including knowledge of elected leaders, acquaintance with political party manifestos and involvement in public consultation procedures. The students develop their political consciousness through the lens of observational learning in which they can see how authority figures, community leaders and even peers interact with the political system. Young people absorb such disengagement trends when their role models show their apathy to civic education or political dialogue. On the other hand, positive modeling, which can lead to increased political literacy, can be reinforced with politically informed people like lecturers discussing the issues of governance or youth leaders discussing party manifestos.

Moreover, the idea of vicarious reinforcement can be used to understand the unwillingness of students to follow some procedures, including bill reviews or public consultations. When students observe these active citizens or the proponents of the reforms getting minimal reward or being hindered by the bureaucratic process, they learn through indirect means that such participation will not bring expected outcomes. This finding discourages motivation towards acquisition or consumption of political information, which eventually strengthens apathy. Thus, the identified lapses in the political awareness among students of the university can be caused not only by their lack of knowledge but also by the expectations observed in society that political involvement is both futile and unrewarding.

Situational Theory of Publics

Developed by Larissa A. Grunig (1983), this theory asserts that individuals' communication behaviour is influenced by their recognition of a problem, perceived level of involvement, and constraints. It explains why and how people communicate or fail to communicate about certain issues. It categorizes people (commonly referred to as publics in the study) based on their awareness of a problem and their willingness to act or communicate about it. The theory has two core assumptions as follows: 1) People do not respond to issues equally and an individual's behavior depends on how they perceive and define a situation. 2) Publics are dynamic because people move between stages as their perception of a problem and their sense of efficacy change.

Grunig identified key independent variables that influence people's communication and action. The first variable is problem recognition where the public has awareness that something is wrong or needs attention. With this variable, a higher recognition means that the public is more likely to seek and share information. The second variable is constraint recognition where the public has a perception of barriers that will hinder or prevent action such as lack of resources, time and power. With this variable, higher constraints means that the public is less likely to act or communicate. Lastly, is the level of involvement where action or communication will be taken on the basis of how personally relevant the issue feels to an individual. As the latter, the effect of this variable would translate to the higher the involvement of the public, the greater the engagement and communication activity.

Other than these three key variables, Grunig identifies dependent variables that influence behavior as follows: information seeking which is actively looking for information, information processing which is paying attention to available information and information sharing which is communicating with others about the issue. Grunig then goes ahead to class the types of publics based on the variables proposed. The first are nonpublic and these are people who are unaware of or unaffected by the issue. Second is the latent publics characterized by those affected by the issue but unaware of it. Third, the aware

publics, these are people who are aware of the issue but are not organized to act. Lastly is the active publics who are aware, motivated and actively engaged in communication or action.

Students who recognize political issues but perceive high constraints or low personal relevance often choose not to participate. The theory helps to contextualize political apathy as a function of perceived utility and capacity for engagement. This is because many students recognize political dysfunction (e.g., corruption, violence, system failures) but see it as unchangeable leading to inaction. They are also faced with barriers like influence, distrust in leadership, fear of violence and inadequate financial resources which reduces their motivation to engage in political affairs. There is also the harsh reality of lack of involvement, there are many students who chose not to engage in political agenda due to their sheer disinterest in the subject matter. For many university students, politics feels distant or irrelevant to their personal lives thus lowering involvement.

In summary, Albert Bandura's social learning theory offers a profound lens for understanding the roots of political apathy amongst university students. It illuminates how behaviors and attitudes are not merely individual choices but social outcomes shaped through observation, imitation and reinforcement. Having witnessed cycles of political cynicism and inefficacy among older generations, young people internalize a learned sense of helplessness that manifests as disengagement. On the other hand, the Situational Theory of Publics provides a complementary perspective by exploring how awareness, perceived constraints and personal involvement influence an individual's disposition to act within their sociopolitical environment. While Bandura explains how apathy is learned, Grunig's theory helps clarify why it persists thereby tracing the continuum from awareness to action and from latent concern to active participation. Together these theories construct a holistic foundation for examining the interplay between social influence, perception and civic engagement among university students.

There is also the harsh reality of lack of involvement, there are many students who chose not to engage in political agenda due to their sheer disinterest in the subject matter

Chapter Three

Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods approach to examine the nature, extent, and drivers of low political participation among university students in Kenya. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques, the research captured not only measurable patterns and trends but also the underlying perceptions and experiences influencing student political engagement. This section presents the research design, study sites, target population, sampling strategies, data collection procedures, and analysis methods applied to ensure a comprehensive and reliable understanding of the issue.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The study collected quantitative and qualitative data in part through the use of a structured questionnaire which was designed to capture key perceptions of each university student involved. The questionnaire was afterwards disseminated to the students from different universities, helping us to statistically gauge the perceptions.

Qualitative data was mainly collected through two ways; through focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The focus group discussions enabled our researchers to understand the personal narratives and experiences that informed the responses received through the questionnaire. Furthermore, our researchers incorporated carefully structured groupings during the FGD's to better understand the dynamics of political engagement and disengagement within different student sub-populations. The FGD's were structured along gender-specific groups (males-only and females-only) and academic-level cohorts (first- and second-year students, and third- and fourth-year students separately). This segmentation allowed our researchers to observe how perspectives, priorities, and patterns of political thought shift when discussions occur within more homogeneous groups, and how these dynamics vary across stages of academic progression and between genders.

The need to adopt this research design was informed by the logic that gauging and understanding political attitudes is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be fully understood through numerical data alone. The study therefore integrated statistical evidence with personal narratives and lived experiences from the university students to allow for deeper insights.

The data collected through Google Form responses was primarily designed to capture the quantitative aspect of student participation in politics. It focused on the set of indicators outlined in the introduction section. The responses were automatically compiled in Google Sheets, which served as the main platform for data cleaning, coding, and organization prior to analysis. The data was analyzed using Google Forms' automated analytics tools, which provided summary statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and visual charts. These descriptive outputs enabled the identification of key trends and patterns across different demographic categories.

In addition to quantitative data, the Google Form included a section of open-ended questions that sought to capture recommendations on what could be done to increase student political

engagement. The qualitative data was analyzed thematically through a process of coding and categorization to identify recurring ideas and patterns.

3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted across 28 leading universities in Kenya. The universities in question are located in the various counties that fall within the wider geographical regions of the country. The latter include; Nairobi region, Central region, Coast region, Eastern region, North Eastern region, Nyanza region, Rift Valley region, and the Western region, with the exception of Northern Kenya. This approach was deemed fit since not all the 47 counties have universities while different regions have universities. Furthermore, this approach allowed the study to capture diverse political attitudes and experiences influenced by different socio-economic and cultural contexts across the country.

3.3 Study Population

The target population for this study comprised university students enrolled in public and private universities across Kenya. The students in question were from various academic disciplines, years of study, and genders to ensure diverse representation. The study largely considered undergraduate students because they constitute the largest number in the respective universities. Furthermore, a significant number of undergraduate students are full-time students as compared to post-graduate students who are mostly part-time students.

Besides the students, the study also targeted key informants who were drawn from the academia, government, think-tanks and private sector. The insights from the informants drawn from the various sectors were triangulated and incorporated into the study. Their incorporation mainly ensured that the conclusions and recommendations were informed by a broad spectrum of stakeholders directly or indirectly engaged with the issue.

3.4 Sample Size Determination and Sampling Procedure

The study did not employ a statistical formula to determine the sample size. Instead, a purposive and regionally representative approach was adopted to ensure inclusivity and diversity of perspectives across Kenya's university landscape.

A total of ten students were selected from each of the 28 participating universities, representing institutions across the country's different regions — including Nairobi, the Coast, Western, Rift Valley, Central, and Eastern regions. This approach was guided by the study's objective to capture diverse political attitudes and experiences among university students rather than to achieve statistical generalizability.

While the sample size may not be statistically representative of all university students in Kenya, the study achieved data saturation, with recurring themes and patterns emerging consistently across respondents from different regions and institutional types (public and private universities). This consistency provides confidence that the findings reasonably reflect broader trends in student political engagement.

For qualitative data collection, purposive sampling was applied. FGDs were organized into homogeneous groups — such as male-only groups; female-only groups; first and second years separately, third and fourth years separately; and student leaders — to explore how perspectives varied by gender, across various academic cohorts and on a leadership status. For the KIIs, participants were selected based on

their specialization, experience, and relevance to the study topic, including informants from academia, the public sector, and the private sector. This purposive selection allowed the research team to gather in-depth, context-specific insights from individuals best positioned to comment on the phenomenon under study. After using purposive sampling to get our informants, snowballing sampling was further used to get additional informants.

For the quantitative survey, simple random sampling was used to select students from different academic disciplines within participating universities. This method gave each eligible student an equal chance of being selected, thereby minimizing selection bias.

Table 1: List of Key Informant Interviewees

Gender	Institution	Description	Number of Key Informants
Male	The National Youth Council	Programs Office	2
Male	The Center for Multiparty Democracy	Staff member involved with youth programs	1
Female	IGAD and the African Union	Election Observer	1
Male	Law firm	Advocate of the High Court of Kenya	1
Female	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC)	Polling clerks	2
Male	The Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies	Researchers	2
Female	Daystar University	Student leader	1
Female	University of Nairobi	Lecturer	1
Male	KANU Youth league	Youth leader	1
		Total Number	12

Table 2: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) schedule of University Students

University	Persons of Interest
Rongo University	Mixed cohort
Maseno University	1 st and 2 nd years
Egerton University	1 st and 2 nd years
Blend of different universities	Female students
Mount Kenya University	3 rd and 4 th years
Pioneer International University, Daystar University, Riara University, Maseno University, Rongo University, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Egerton University	University student leaders

University	Persons of Interest
Blend of different universities	Male students
Moi University	Mixed cohort
Daystar University	Mixed cohort

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards to safeguard the rights, dignity, and welfare of all participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no form of coercion or undue influence used during recruitment. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with a clear and comprehensive explanation of the study's objectives, procedures and anticipated benefits. Only those who provided informed consent were allowed to participate.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process. No identifying information was collected or disclosed in any part of the study. All responses were coded to ensure that participants' identities remained protected. Data was stored securely and accessed only by the researchers. Participants also retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any penalty or need to provide a reason.

The researchers adhered to transparency, honesty, and integrity throughout the study, following recognized academic and professional ethical guidelines.

3.6 Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights into the nature and drivers of political apathy among university students in Kenya, certain limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study did not employ a statistically representative sampling method. This is because the study sought not to obtain statistical generalizability of the findings but instead it sought to capture diverse political views across different regions in the country. To this end, a simple random sampling approach was used that included selecting ten students from universities across different regions of the country to fill the survey while a purposive sampling approach was used to select FGD respondents. Since we achieved data saturation and started experiencing recurring themes in the FGD's the researchers had confidence in the study.

Second, because the primary data collected via surveys and FGD's relied primarily on self-reported information, responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias as participants could have provided answers they perceived as more acceptable. To mitigate this, the research team emphasized confidentiality and anonymity before each interview and discussion, creating a safe environment that encouraged honest and open responses.

Third, the study encountered challenges in obtaining adequate responses to the survey questionnaire. Many targeted participants were either unwilling or hesitant to complete the survey, possibly due to limited interest in political matters, apprehension about expressing political opinions or lack of a financial incentive. This reduced the overall response rate and limited the quantity of quantitative data collected, largely influencing the decision to sample ten respondents from each participating university.

To address this, the research team employed multiple strategies to encourage participation, including follow-up reminders through trusted campus representatives and through the use of peer networks. Besides the campus representatives, the research team also relied on trusted contact persons within the different universities to encourage participation.

Lastly, logistical and resource constraints limited the number of universities and participants that could be included, which may have reduced the breadth of institutional representation. However, this was effectively addressed through the use of virtual platforms to conduct various interviews and FGD's where in instances where the researchers were not able to avail themselves in-person.

The data collected through Google Form responses was primarily designed to capture the quantitative aspect of student participation in politics. It focused on the set of indicators outlined in the introduction section

Chapter Four

Findings

4.1 Demographic characteristics

Understanding the demographic characteristics of respondents provides essential context for interpreting the study's findings on political awareness and participation among university students. This section presents a summary of the key demographic features, including gender, age, year of study, field of study, and regional representation.

The study achieved a fairly balanced gender representation, reflecting the growing gender parity within Kenyan universities. Female respondents constituted approximately 54 per cent, while male respondents accounted for 46 per cent of the total participants. This balance ensured that perspectives from both genders were adequately captured in assessing political awareness and participation.

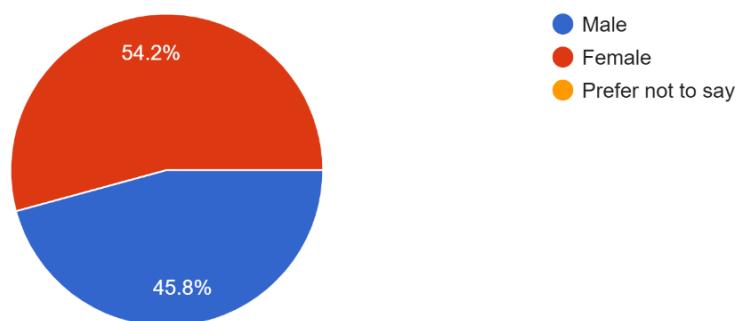


Figure 7: Pie-chart depicting respondent's gender

70 per cent of the respondents were aged between 18 and 22 years, representing the typical age range of undergraduate students in Kenya. 22 per cent of the respondents fell within the 23–26 years category, 3 per cent between the age group of above 27 years and 1 per cent under 18 years. Below is a pie-chart that captures the statistical information;

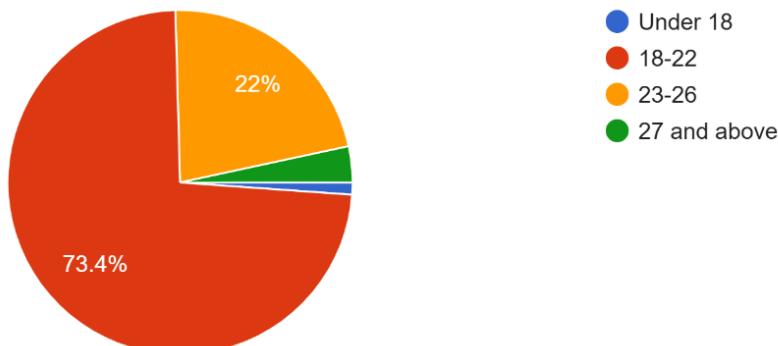


Figure 8: Pie-chart depicting respondents age group

Respondents were sampled from a wide range of academic disciplines, including the social sciences, humanities, business, law and education, and STEM-related courses. Students pursuing social science and humanities programs (such as Political Science, International Relations, and Sociology) comprised 52 per cent of the sample, while those from science, technology, and business fields constituted 48 per cent. This diversity ensured that the study captured varying degrees of interest and exposure to political issues across disciplines. Below is a pie-chart of the respondents year of study.

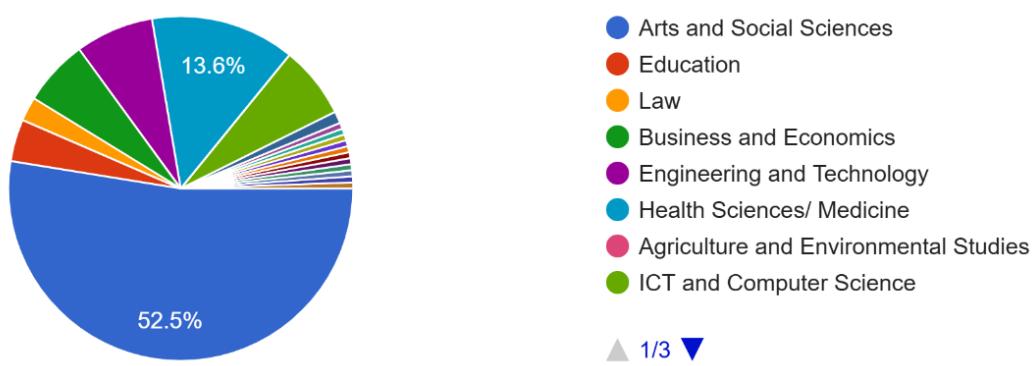


Figure 9: Pie-chart depicting respondents field of study

4.2 An Assessment of the Level of Political Awareness and Participation Among University Students

When assessing the level of political awareness among university students, the study reveals a modest understanding of elected leaders across various positions, alongside an average awareness of major political party manifestos and the role of the National Youth Council. However, when it comes to political participation, the findings indicate alarmingly low levels of engagement among students across the assessed indicators—particularly in areas such as voting and political party membership.

When assessing the level of awareness of their elected leaders the study finds that among university students, governors were the most known while the MCA's were the least known. Governors were the most widely recognized, followed by Senators, Women Representatives and the MCA's as illustrated in the bar graphs below;

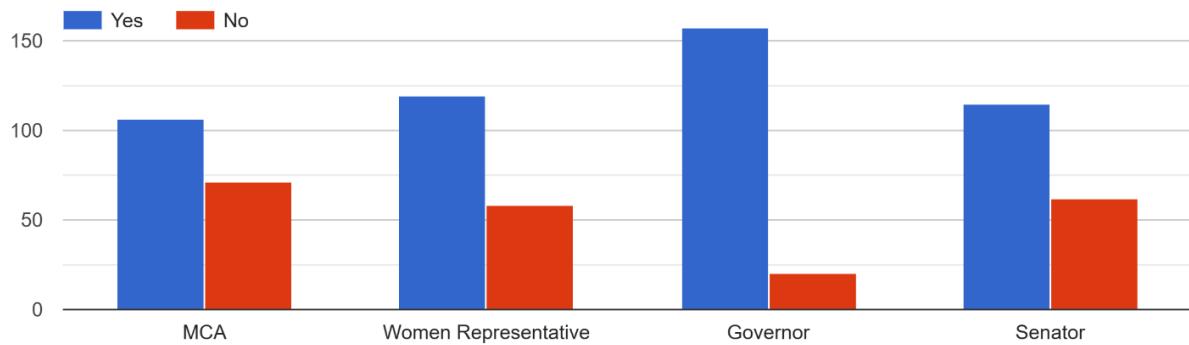


Figure 10:Bargraph depicting level of awareness of elected leaders among respondents

When examining the level of awareness of the National Youth Council, a statutory body mandated to represent the interests of the youth (which included university students), only 56 per cent of university students were aware of the council, its mandate and functions. The Council was established under the National Youth Council Act No. 10 of 2009 (Cap. 132) and became operational in January 2010. The functions of the council include regulating and coordinating youth-focused initiatives, promoting the National Youth Policy, mobilizing resources for youth programs, and facilitating youth inclusion in decision-making bodies.

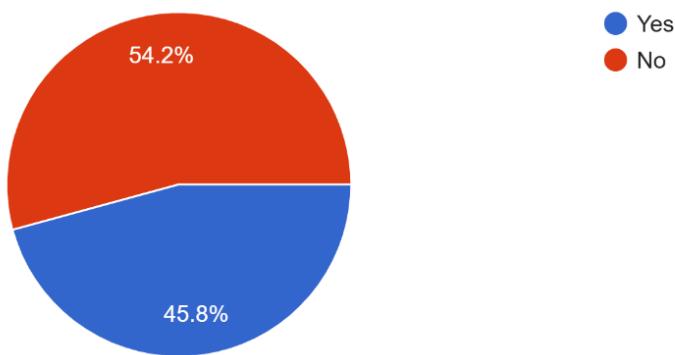


Figure 11: Pie-chart depicting awareness of the NYC among respondents

When assessing the level of awareness of the manifestos of key political parties (ruling and the opposition parties), the study reveals that 58 per cent of the respondents were aware of the manifestos while 41 per cent per cent were unaware. While 59 per cent of respondents indicated that they were aware of the manifestos of both the ruling and opposition parties, their understanding was largely superficial. Most students could only recall popular slogans or catchphrases—for instance, the “bottom-up” economic model associated with the ruling party—but were unable to explain its actual meaning or outline specific policy proposals contained in the manifestos. This suggests that while exposure to political messaging is relatively high among university students, comprehension and critical engagement with party ideologies remain limited.

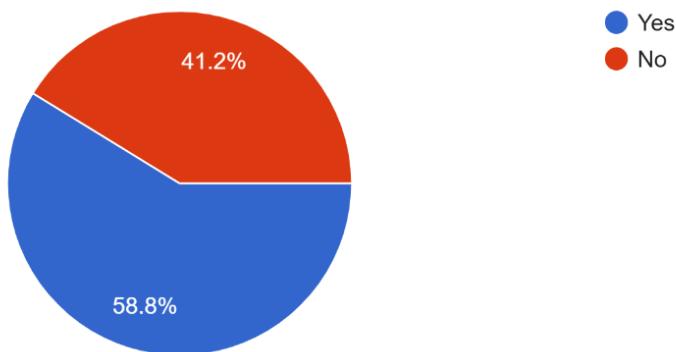


Figure 12: Pie chart depicting awareness of political manifestos among the respondents

When examining the level of political participation, the study reveals generally low engagement across all the indicators employed. Starting with voting, only 21 per cent per cent of respondents reported being registered voters as of 2025, while the remaining 79 per cent indicated that they were not registered. Among those who were registered, just 12 per cent stated that they voted in the previous

general election. These findings highlight a significantly lower participations in voter registration and turn out among the demographic.

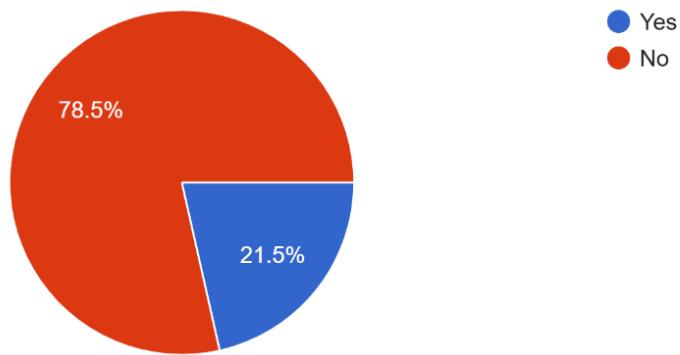


Figure 13: Pie-chart depicting voter registration status among respondents

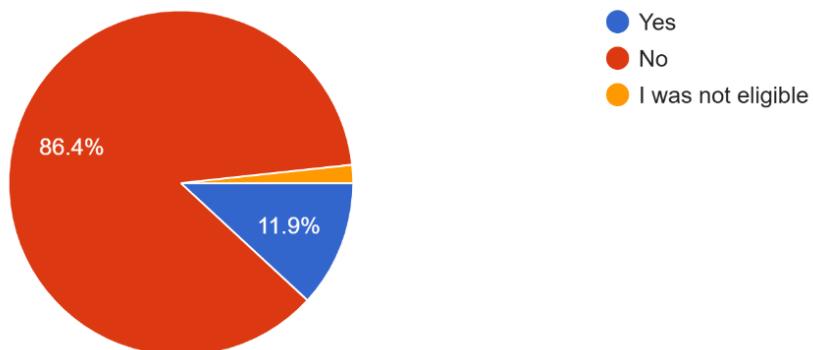


Figure 14: Pie-chart depicting voter behavior in the last general election

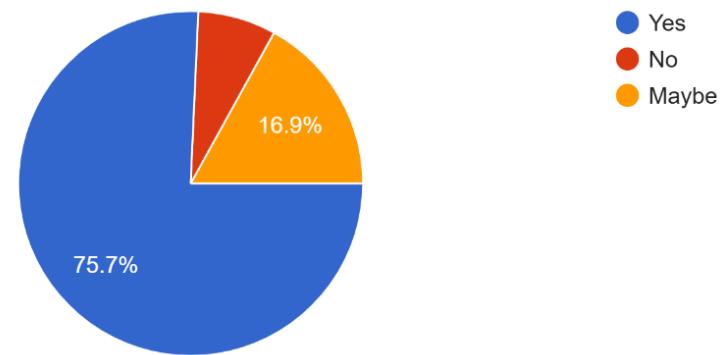


Figure 15: Pie-chart depicting voter behavior in the coming general election

When examining their membership and active participation in political parties, only 5 per cent were registered members of political parties while an alarming 95 per cent were not.

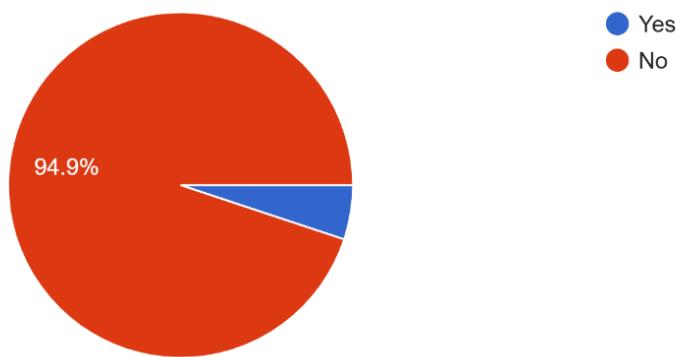


Figure 16: Pie-chart depicting political party membership among respondents

When it came to participation in public consultation processes and protest participation, university students recorded higher levels of engagement compared to other forms of political involvement such as voting, political party membership, and participation in public forums or policy processes. From the data collected, 27% of the students reported having participated in public consultation forums or community dialogues, indicating moderate involvement in formal civic processes. Notably, a higher proportion—42.9%—reported taking part in protest activities, with many citing their participation in the anti-Finance Bill demonstrations as a key instance of political expression. The data on the participation in the anti-finance bill protests is illustrated in the pie-chart below;

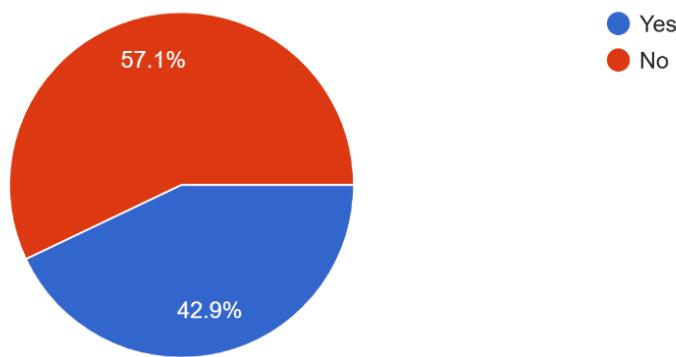


Figure 17: Pie-chart depicting participation in the anti-finance bill protests

4.3 Hindrances to Active Political Participation Among University Students

4.3.1 Lack of trust in Politicians and Political Institutions

Based on the indicators used in the study to assess political participation, it is evident that lack of trust in politicians and political institutions has influenced university students' engagement — to some extent in voting, but more profoundly in political party membership. When responding to the survey issued, nearly 70 per cent of respondents identified distrust in political leaders as a major reason for their limited engagement in formal political processes. This distrust stemmed from the notion that politicians are self-serving, corrupt, and unresponsive to youth needs. When asked whether politicians care about the youth, an alarming 80 per cent of our respondents indicated that politicians do not care about the youth. Below are responses that highlight the lack of trust in politicians and political institutions as exhibited by university students.

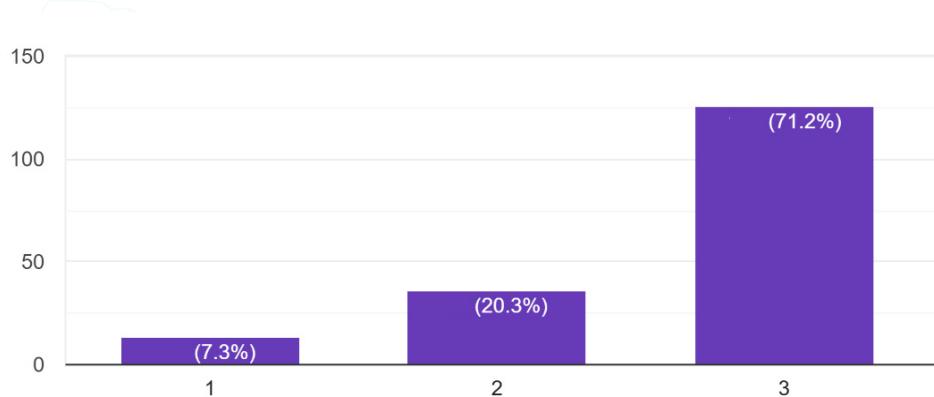


Figure 18: Bar graph of responses on whether politicians care about the youth on a scale of 1-3
(1-Strongly Agree 2-Neutral 3-Strongly disagree)

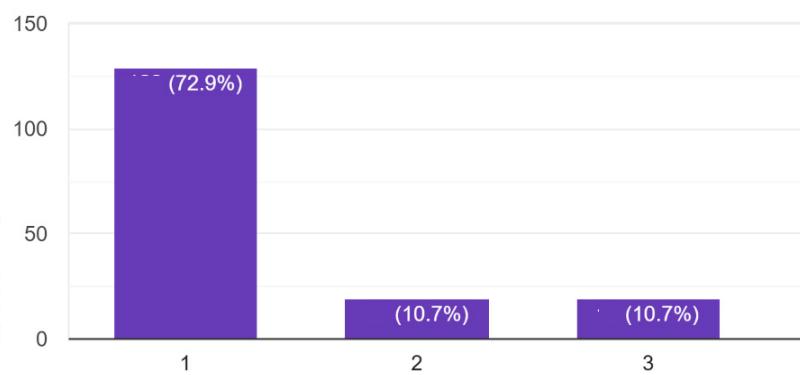


Figure 19: Bar graph of responses on whether politicians are corrupt on a scale of 1-3
(1-Strongly Agree 2-Neutral 3- Strongly Disagree)

Besides the politicians, university students similarly express distrust for political institutions, most notably the IEBC and political parties. When engaged in their trust for the IEBC, several respondents questioned the impartiality and transparency of the institution's management of previous electoral processes, often citing past controversies surrounding election results. Most notable controversies mentioned during the FGD's were the death of Chris Msando, the IEBC's IT manager who was found dead under suspicious circumstances in 2017 and the 2022 resignation of four IEBC commissioners prior to the announcing of the August 2022 general elections. Despite this, when asked about their intention to vote, 75 per cent highlight that they intend on voting in the next general election despite their lack of trust in the IEBC. Furthermore, the study found that the motivation to vote among university students was largely influenced by two main factors: the excitement of being first-time voters and the desire to remove perceived corrupt leaders from office.

This contrasts with the expected norm in functional democracies, where the electorate's voting behavior is guided by ideological inclination and resultant policy-based considerations, such as candidates' development agendas. This perception is widely shared among the university students and it reflects the distrust for the incumbent politicians. The primary underlying motives to vote exhibited by the students may however not produce the desired results if the young electorate operate solely on the desire to eject perceived corrupt leaders from office. There is a need to consider the integrity, competence, and policy orientation of candidates when electing leaders, rather than relying solely on emotional or punitive motivations.

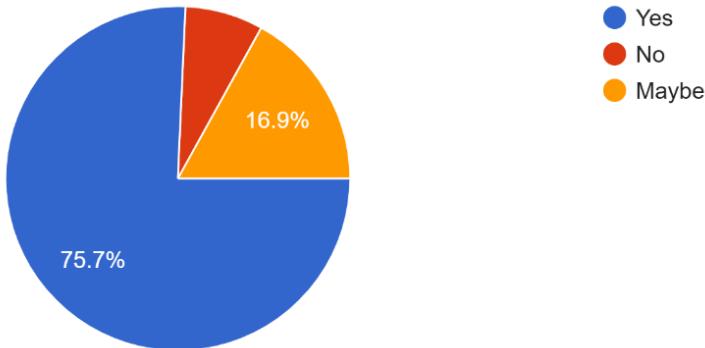


Figure 20: Pie-chart on voter behavior for the coming general election among respondents

Similarly, political parties were viewed with suspicion among university students. From our respondents, 90 per cent of university students are not registered members of political parties. The study reveals that most students perceive political parties primarily as vehicles for individual politicians to ascend to power, rather than as ideologically grounded institutions representing distinct policy positions or public interests. This perception has in part deterred many from associating with political parties.

Distrust in political leaders emerged as one of the most significant deterrents to students' participation in public consultation processes such as bill reviews and policy dialogues. The survey indicated that 70 per cent of respondents cited a lack of trust with political figures as the primary factor to their disengagement, ranking it higher than disinterest or security issues. This quantitative result was reinforced by the focus group conversations in which participants demonstrated an opinion that the majority of leaders are self-seeking and insensitive to the concerns of young people. Students reported that they usually consider the idea of public consultations as the platform of performative acts that are aimed to justify predetermined decisions instead of providing the young people with the opportunity to participate. Consequently, a lot of students find their input to be insignificant and this has created a self-completing cycle of distrust and non-involvement in civic activities. This distrust has consequently undermined the perceived worth in engagement breaking trust in the system of governance and the continued political disengagement in the university demographic.

4.3.2 Disinterest in Politics

From the survey issued, 20 per cent of our respondents indicated that they had no interest in politics and governance in the country. As a result, this has negatively impacted their levels of political awareness and participation. On their level of political awareness, disinterest has contributed to the lack of knowledge of their elected leaders, major political party manifestos, and the National Youth Council, which is their representation body. On their level of political participation, the lack of interest in politics has negatively affected their participation in public consultation processes, protests, political parties and their ability to register as voters and actually turn out to vote.

4.3.3 Security concerns

The last four general elections have seen Kenya go through recurring but isolated acts of violence, insecurity and tension across different parts of the country due to political rivalry. Subsequently, this has resulted in the electoral processes being tightly linked with violence, loss of life, property destruction, political tensions and instabilities albeit with varying intensities. Over time these experiences have

instilled a persistent sense of fear toward political participation and public expression. This fear can be traced to the country's political history, especially the oppressive environment that characterized the administration of the second president, The Late Daniel Arap Moi where political opposition was often met with intimidation and coercion. These historical patterns have not only left a psychological imprint on the nation but also continue to define how citizens, particularly the youth, view political engagement. Recent statistics also show the extent to which there is insecurity in the political procedures in Kenya which underscores the fact that violence, abduction and brutality by the police all contribute to political apathy.

As an example, the extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearance cases were 159 in 2024 in Kenya and were documented by a coalition named Missing voices (Missing Voices, 2025). According to a write up done by the International Commission of Jurists Kenya, of these 65% were police related killings and 55% were enforced disappearances. The same report notes a 24% increase in combined cases compared to 2023 and a 450% increase in enforced disappearances which is from 10 in 2023 to 55 in 2024 (Wachu, 2025).

Having examined the national trends in election related violence and insecurity, the study's data now turn to how these realities are experienced by university students. The findings demonstrate how security concerns affect specific forms of political engagement. Qualitative data from focus groups revealed that many students associate political activism with abductions, unlawful arrests, police brutality and even mysterious deaths of outspoken youth. Female participants specifically highlighted fears of sexual harassment and rape during public demonstrations as previously noted while male participants cited fear over abductions or arbitrary arrests which are often correlated to torture.

Participants also referenced abductions, torture, extrajudicial killings and police brutality as spinoffs of protests and other forms of public political participation which in turn reinforce caution and disengagement among university students. In addition to this, female students reported higher levels of physical violation and harassment especially in crowded political events, events that deterred them from participating in such gatherings. This gendered insecurity also increases the gap of participation since women are less likely to join protests or rallies. In general, this research concludes that personal security concerns result in a problem of self-censorship and selective engagement. Security anxieties heighten other obstacles and have also produced a generation of politically conscious, but risk-averse youths who would rather take safer alternatives to civil political action for instance through online discourse, a trend that has birthed the term "key board warriors."

4.3.4 Information Inaccessibility as a catalyst of limited political awareness

The study indicates that limited political awareness has remained one of the highest causes of political apathy among the university students.. These findings can be related to the sentiments expressed in the focus group discussions with some of the respondents admitting that they knew an extensive number of renowned politicians, but they were not conversant with their specific mandate and agenda of policies. Such patterns point to a form of surface level political awareness one informed more by popular rhetoric than by practical understanding of political processes.

A key factor contributing to this gap is information inaccessibility. The study notes that the respondents agreed that they do not know where to get credible political information while others reported uncertainty about how to join political parties or participate in public consultation forums such as bill reviews. This aligns with qualitative insights where participants mentioned never having encountered

public notices or updates on policy consultations. All the data points out to the fact that the low political awareness of students and political apathy is a correlate of the lack of exposure to the available, credible and organized political information.

The research also notes that social media has now emerged as the leading source of political information among students with of the respondents citing social media as the most significant media form in keeping them informed. Although social media is immediate and accessible, its algorithm structure inadvertently restricts civic content exposure. As a result of this process unless one actively follows official pages such as the IEBC, the National Youth Council or political party accounts, they are unlikely to come across posts on public participation or policy updates. Even with this in mind algorithmic structures might also push certain agendas more than others hence very minimal spread of these updates. As a result, students who are not physically exposed to such accounts are usually not in-the-know of the major civic opportunities further creating a digital divide in political awareness.

This over-dependence on social media creates informational echo chambers whereby political news is altered through entertainment trends, commentary or influencer stories instead of objective news. This poses a risk as such narratives are founded on the interpretations of said persons. This makes the study population more susceptible to false news, propaganda and falsified political comprehension and consciousness. This dynamic supports the qualitative results that politics is seen as remote or off limits by a large number of students as they do not know where or how to approach politics.

Lastly, information gaps also seem to influence the membership and representation of political parties. The study reveals that of the interviewees did not identify themselves with a political party. This is the same with qualitative data gathered during the discussions in focus groups. The majority of FGD participants were not members of any political party and those who were interested expressed uncertainty about the party's values or agenda. This is heavily due to a lack of clear pathways for students to join or meaningfully contribute to party activities. Unless there is carefully planned information and inclusive communication means, young people will remain closed off to party politics. Overall, quantitative and qualitative results depict that uninformed students are much less likely to engage in political and governance procedures.

4.4 The Role of Social Media in Shaping Political Awareness and Participation among Students

Social media has emerged as a primary medium of communication across the continent, especially among youth. According to the DataReportal, Kenya had an internet-penetration rate of 40.8 % at the start of 2024. Internet penetration refers to the proportion of a country's population that has access to and uses the internet. The same data show that the average Kenyan spent 3 hours and 43 minutes per day on social-media platforms—about 1 hour and 13 minutes more than the global average of roughly 2 hours 30 minutes.

This study complements those findings by underscoring the role of university students in driving the high social-media penetration and engagement. It notes a great dependency on social-media, which in part helps understand the statistics highlighting the high social media usage among Kenyans. From the study, a significant 83% of the students reported relying on social media as their primary source of information, highlighting its central role in shaping political awareness and discourse. Television ranked second at 33%, while the remaining respondents cited other communication channels—such as radio, newspapers, and interpersonal interactions—as their main sources of information.

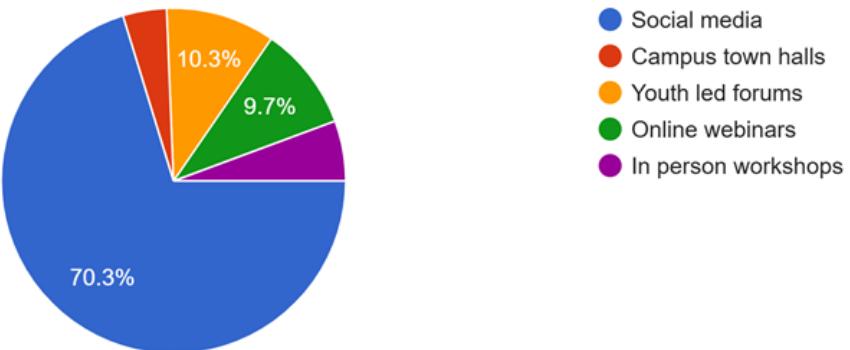


Figure 21: Pie-chart on respondents preferred platform for civic education

Beyond being an avenue for acquiring information, social media has also emerged as a powerful platform for mobilization and civic engagement. For instance, among those who took part in the anti-Finance Bill protests in Kenya, 69 per cent indicated that they first received information about the demonstrations online.

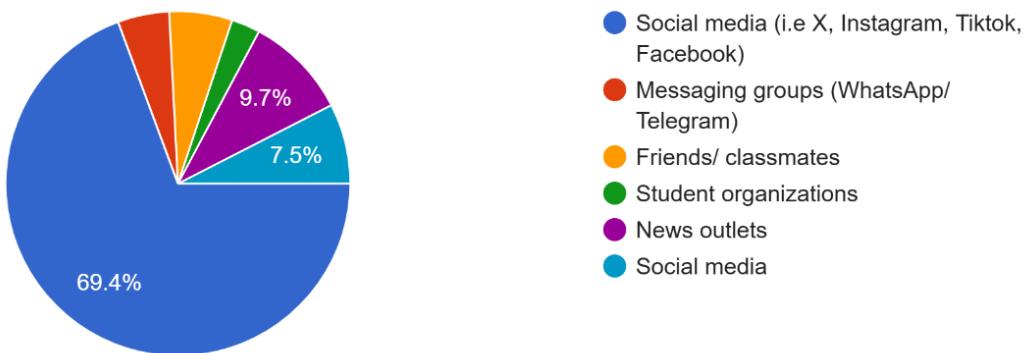


Figure 22: Pie-chart on respondent's knowledge on the protests they participated in

Additionally, as highlighted on the pie-chart, 43 per cent highlighted that social media was their primary platform for acquiring the finance bill

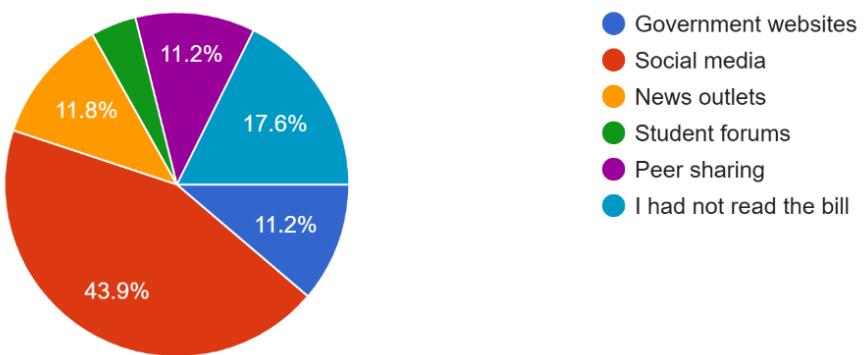


Figure 23: Pie-chart on the respondent's primary source of knowledge about the Finance bill

Furthermore, when asked about their preferred platform for civic education initiatives, 70 percent of respondents expressed social media as their preferred avenue. Traditional channels of civic education, such as community forums, received comparatively low interest among university students, highlighting a generational shift toward digital modes of engagement.

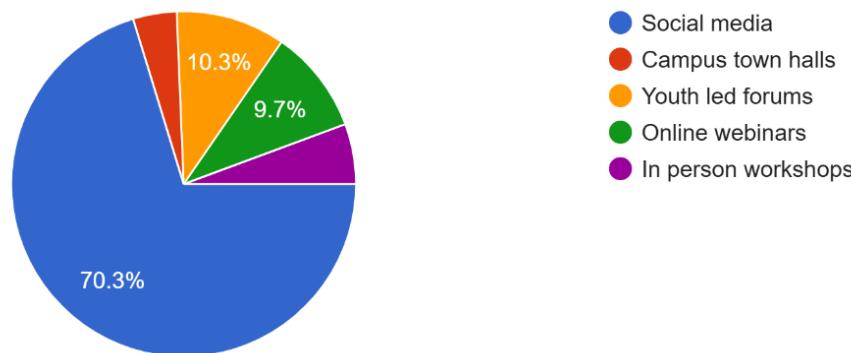


Figure 24: Pie-chart on the respondent's preferred platform for civic education

4.5 Strategies for Enhancing Political Engagement Among University Students

In light of the findings, this sub-section proposed strategies for enhancing political engagement among university students, ranging from trust building to the designing of tailored civic education programs.

To begin with, there is a need to strengthen trust between young people and both political leaders and institutions. As highlighted in the findings, many students express deep-seated distrust toward politicians and view them as corrupt and self-serving, particularly those who have been in politics for extended periods. This perception whether real or perceived needs to be addressed, as it carries the potential to fuel discontent and escalate into social or political tensions if left unmitigated. This has been particularly evident during periods of unrest when young people often take to the streets and target and destroy properties linked to politicians and in some isolated cases even trolling their kins online. To address this challenge, the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC), which is mandated to promote national cohesion, should consider collaborating with university administrations, student unions, and student leaders to organize intergenerational and cross-party dialogues. These forums would provide opportunities for constructive engagement, bridge ideological divides, and foster a culture of tolerance and mutual understanding among students.

When it comes to the IEBC, as highlighted, the students have expressed distrust in their ability to conduct credible elections. To address this distrust gap, the IEBC should consider targeted trust-building and engagement initiatives, especially in the lead-up to the general elections. These trust building engagement initiatives should focus on addressing the nature of the elections, voter register concerns and the changes that have been made by the new commissioners and what they are doing differently. Given that a significant proportion of respondents indicated a preference for receiving civic education through social media, the IEBC could effectively leverage digital platforms to foster transparency but most importantly to engage youth in meaningful dialogue.

Similarly, the study notes low levels of trust in political parties, coupled with a superficial understanding of party manifestos among students. To bridge this gap, major political parties and indeed smaller ones as well should consider targeted outreach to university students. This could include developing youth-friendly, digestible content that summarizes their manifestos, policies, and priorities. By utilizing social media, television, and other youth-oriented platforms, parties can enhance awareness and promote informed political engagement. Additionally, holding interactive sessions to explain party structures and internal operations could help demystify misconceptions and encourage students to view political participation more positively.

The NYC, in collaboration with the State Department for Youth Affairs, should develop and implement comprehensive civic education initiatives targeting university students. Such programs should aim to enhance students' understanding of the importance of active political participation, their civic rights and responsibilities, and the role of youth in democratic governance. By institutionalizing civic education within universities, these agencies can help nurture an informed, responsible, and politically engaged generation of young citizens.

To strengthen the impact of civic education among university students, there is a need to integrate civic education and social media literacy into the common units offered across universities. Embedding civic education within the curriculum can help shape students' perceptions toward political participation. This will help to awaken interest among the disinterested, empower those who are aware but hesitant to engage, and reinforce the commitment of those already active in civic and political spaces.

In addition, social media literacy should be incorporated as a complementary component of this effort. Given that Kenya ranks significantly above the global average in social media use—averaging approximately one hour and forty-three minutes above the global average of two hours and 30 minutes per day, according to DataReportal—young people are highly exposed to digital content that can shape their political attitudes and behavior. Equipping students with the skills to critically evaluate online information will therefore help them navigate misinformation and disinformation campaigns, promote responsible digital citizenship, and foster informed political engagement.

Additionally, the government should deliberately and systematically involve young people in public participation processes at all levels of governance. Article 55 of the Constitution of Kenya provides that the State shall take measures, including affirmative action programs, to ensure that the youth are represented and actively participate in social, economic, and political life. In this regard, affirmative action initiatives should be designed to reflect youth interests, priorities, and communication habits—some of which are highlighted in this study. Meaningful inclusion of youth in public participation not only fulfills a constitutional obligation but also strengthens democratic governance by ensuring that policies and decisions are responsive to the needs and aspirations of this critical demographic.

Finally, to university students, there is a need to be more intentional and proactive in seeking knowledge beyond consumable social media content. Students should shift from passive reliance on short, entertainment-driven information and instead cultivate a habit of engaging with detailed, credible, and intellectually enriching material. Developing a culture of critical reading and informed analysis will not only enhance their understanding of political and societal issues but also empower them to participate meaningfully in shaping Kenya's future. While some of the recommendations presented herein advocate for various public institutions communicating in ways that resonate with young people—such as through civic education delivered via social media and the creation of easily consumable content—these are intended as short-term strategies to awaken awareness among the youth. The ultimate goal is to inspire a shift toward deeper reflection and the adoption of a more critical and informed approach to political engagement.

Furthermore, there is a need to move away from overdependence on social media as the primary source of information. While social media remains an important tool for communication and engagement, it is essential for users—especially young people—to be socially media literate and to verify the accuracy of information before sharing it. Developing such critical awareness will help curb the spread of misinformation and promote responsible and informed digital engagement.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The research confirms that political apathy among the university students is a complex effect caused by both structural and perceptual blocks. Youths value the necessity of effective participation in the political process, but despite this the political participation is still delayed due to breeding of mistrust towards the political leaders, unavailability of credible information, the effects of the social media and fear of personal insecurity. These barriers create the context whereby political awareness in most cases does not necessarily lead to political action. The findings further reveal that the majority of the students believe that governance sectors such as public consultations, political party activities and elections are not open or responsive to their interests.

In general, the arguments serve to prove that the causes of political apathy lie not only in the lack of interest but rather in the more general socio-political arena, which preconditions the way the youth engage with the state and its institutions. The resolution of these challenges demands the establishment of trust, better access to open information and the establishment of secure and inclusive political participation. It is therefore important to strengthen civic education and bring a true dialogue between the youth and decision makers as a way of changing awareness levels to engagement.

Lastly, the extension of political indifference among the student population in universities is not only an embodiment of apathy but also a reaction to systemic exclusion, fear and disillusionment. However, it is this group that has a tremendous potential as the transformative force in the Kenyan democratic arena. Stakeholders can unlock this potential by investing in informed and secure and trust-based participation structures that can see the young citizens shift from the margins of politics to the center of governance.

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Annex

Annex 1: Survey Questions

Preamble

This study is being conducted by the International Relations Students Association of Kenya (IRSAK) to assess political apathy among university students. The results will help inform civic education, policy advocacy, and youth empowerment programs.

General Objective

To explore the extent and underlying causes of political apathy among university students in Kenya and recommend youth-led interventions for democratic engagement.

Section A: Demographic Information

Age?

- Under 18 18–22 23–26 27 and above

Gender

- Male Female Prefer not to say

Which university are you enrolled in?

County of Origin?

Level of Study

- Certificate
 Diploma
 Undergraduate
 Postgraduate

Field of Study

- Arts and Social Sciences
 Education

- Law
- Business and Economics
- Engineering and Technology
- Health Sciences / Medicine
- Agriculture and Environmental Studies
- ICT and Computer Science
- Natural Sciences
- Other (please specify)

Section B: Political Awareness and Affiliation

Are you a member of a political party?

- Yes
- No

Are you aware of the following elected leaders in your county? (Yes/No for each)

- MCA
- Women Representative
- Governor
- Senator

Are you aware of the National Youth Council (NYC)?

- Yes
- No

How would you rate your understanding of Kenya's political system?

- Very good
- Good
- Average
- Poor
- Very poor

Are you aware of Kenya's key political parties and their manifestos?

- Yes
- No

How frequently do you follow political news?

- Daily
- Weekly
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never

Section C: Political Participation

Are you a registered voter?

- Yes
- No

Did you vote in the last general election?

- Yes
- No
- I was not eligible

If you did not vote in the last election, why not? (Select all that apply)

- I was not registered
- I was not available

- I did not trust the process
- I was disinterested
- Security concerns
- Other (please specify)

Will you vote in the next general election?

- Yes
- No
- I was not eligible

Have you ever participated in the following? (Select all that apply)

- Student elections
- Political rallies
- Online political discussions
- Volunteered in political campaigns
- Public participation
- Protests
- None of the above

Section D: Anti-Finance Bill Protests

Did you participate in the anti-Finance Bill protests?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what motivated you to join? (Select all that apply)

- Opposition to the Finance Bill
- Exercising democratic rights
- Influenced by peers
- Concern over cost of living
- Other (please specify)

Before the protest, had you read the Finance Bill?

- Yes – in full
- Yes – in part
- No

If you read the Finance Bill, where did you access it? (Select all that apply)

- Government websites
- Social media
- News outlets
- Student forums

- Peer sharing
- Other (please specify)

How did you learn about the protest you participated in? (Select all that apply)

- Social media
- Messaging groups (WhatsApp/Telegram)
- Friends/classmates
- Posters/flyers
- Student organizations
- News outlets
- Other (please specify)

Section E: Attitudes Toward Politics

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (Strongly agree – Strongly disagree)

- My vote makes a difference
- Politics affects my life
- Politicians care about youth
- Most politicians are corrupt
- I trust Kenya's electoral process

In your opinion, how important is youth involvement in politics?

- Very important
- Important
- Slightly important
- Not important

Section F: Barriers and Civic Education

What prevents you from engaging in political processes? (Select all that apply)

- Lack of trust in politicians
- Fear of violence
- Lack of access to information
- Feeling powerless
- Disinterest
- Academic pressure
- Religious/cultural reasons
- Other (please specify)

Main sources of political information (Select all that apply)

- Television
- Radio
- Newspapers
- Social media
- Family/friends
- Campus forums
- Other (please specify)

Preferred platforms for civic education (Select all that apply)

- Social media
- Campus town halls
- Youth-led forums
- Online webinars
- In-person workshops

In your opinion, what can be done to increase university students' political participation? (Open-ended)

Would you be willing to participate in future civic engagement initiatives?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Annex 2: Focus Group Discussion Questions

The International Relations Students Association of Kenya is conducting a study on political apathy among university students in Kenya. The study's main aim is to investigate the causes of political disengagement among university students. The findings will be used to tailor civic engagement programs

Section A: Political Participation

Did you vote in the last general election? Why or why not?

Will you vote in the coming election? Why or Why not?

Section B: Attitudes toward Politics

Do you believe your vote makes a difference? Why or why not?

How much do you trust the electoral system in Kenya?

Section C: Barriers to Participation

What keeps you or other students from engaging in politics? (either elective or not)

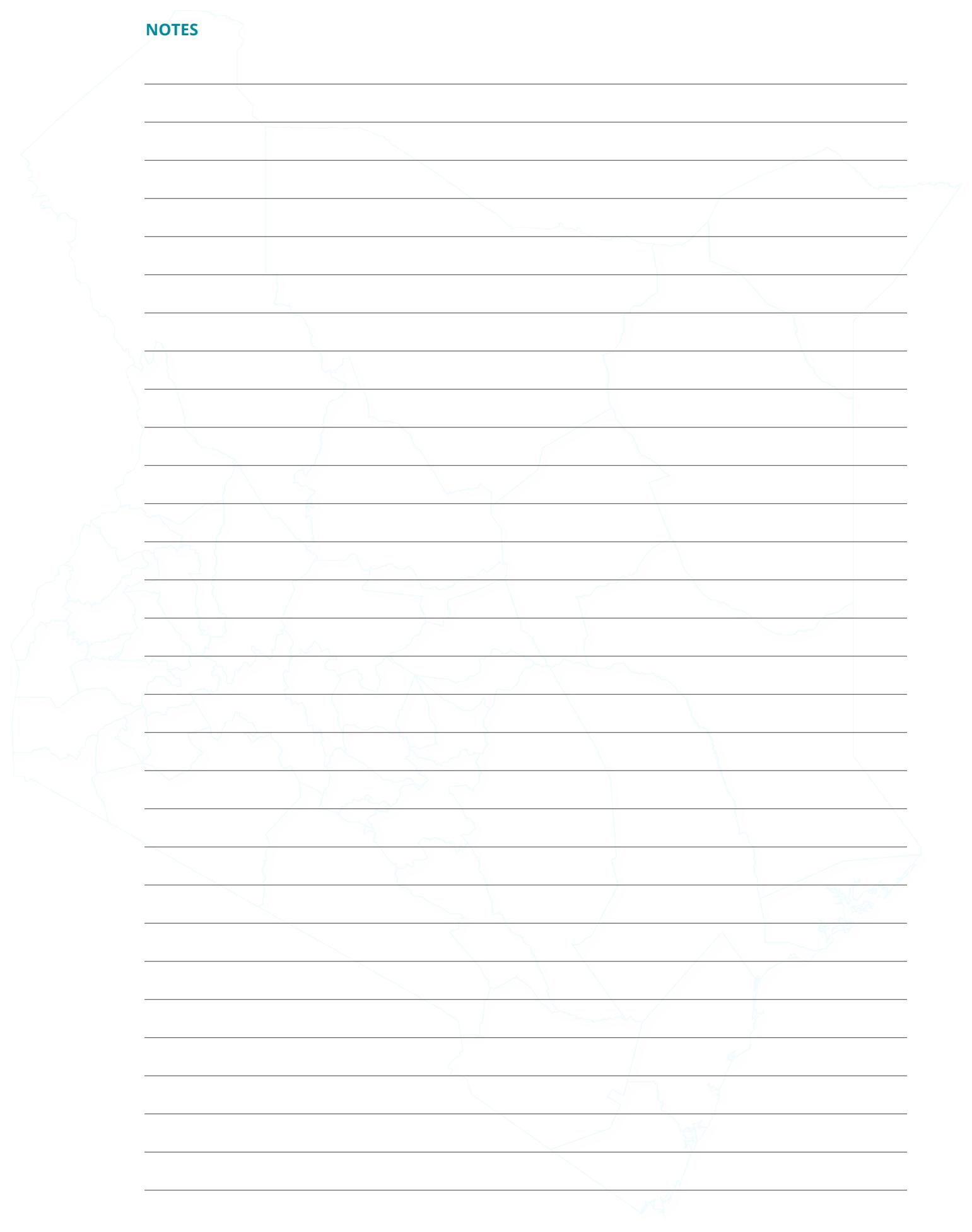
Section D: Civic Education & Solutions

In your opinion, what can be done to increase student political participation?

Annex 3: Key Informant Interview Questions

1. Why was there a wave of active participation of university students in politics in the 60s' and 90's?
2. In the contemporary world, do you think there is a shift in the status quo (university students political participation) in:
 - i) The world?
 - ii) In Africa?
 - iii) Kenya?
3. If yes, why do you think there is a shift and where did things start going wrong? And if No, what convinces you that there is no shift in university students' participation in politics?
4. From your experience working with young people, what would you say keeps young people from engaging in politics as;
 - i) As possible candidates?
 - ii) As voters?
 - iii) Protesters?
 - iv) Political party members?

NOTES





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