Regular Article

Interplay between civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy: Insights from a study on youth students at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

Zenaw Alem Abebe [a,*], Kassahun Asres Admassu [b], Taye Negussie Belayneh [b]

[a] *Addis Ababa University, Department of Sociology, 1176, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*
[b] *Addis Ababa University, Department of Sociology, 1176, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

A B S T R A C T

Research on youth engagement in civic activities and its influence on political trust and support for democracy in developing countries, particularly Ethiopia, is limited. This study aims to address this gap by examining the relationship between civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy among students at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia. The findings indicate that both offline and online political engagement positively influenced students' political trust, with offline engagement increasing trust by 9% and online engagement by 2%. In contrast, offline political engagement, online political engagement, and volunteerism negatively correlated with students' support for democracy, decreasing it by 4%, 2%, and 7%, respectively. Engagement in voluntary work, voting, and community problem-solving activities showed no relationship with political trust. Furthermore, voting and participation in community problem-solving activities had no relationship with support for democracy. The study concludes that different types of civic engagement exert varying influences on political trust and support for democracy. Future research should explore latent forms of civic engagement using pre- and post-tests and longitudinal designs, and include youth not enrolled in public universities.

1. Introduction

The literature presents diverse perspectives on the role of young people in promoting democracy and societal change through civic engagement (Li, 2019). While some scholars argue that young citizens are disengaging from public spaces and the socio-political spheres of their societies, thus contributing little or nothing to the advancement of democracy (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), others assert that, if allowed to engage and equipped with the appropriate values, attitudes, and skills, young people can lead efforts to promote democracy and sustainable community development (Cho et al., 2020; Enchikova et al., 2019; Getachew, 2020; Matsela, 2015). Regardless of these differing viewpoints, the involvement of young people in political and community matters has become a vital component of national development across the globe. This idea is widely acknowledged as a fundamental basis for democratic governance by numerous researchers (Lanero et al., 2018; Li, 2019; Robinson, 2019).

Over the past 30 years, there has been an ongoing discussion about the importance of civic engagement in the Western world as a fundamental component of social capital that supports democracy. It is widely recognized that constitutional democracy and its institutions depend on well-informed citizens who possess a strong understanding of how government functions, adhere to the rule of law, respect the rights of others, employ evidence-based decision-making when addressing public issues, and strive to enhance their communities (Cvetanova & Naumovska, 2016). As a result, participation in social and political activities within a community encourages citizens to actively support democracy.

In contrast, there is a growing concern regarding the decline in civic and political engagement among young people in the United States and Europe. Some scholars have identified this phenomenon as a crisis of democracy (Putnam, 1995). However, as a counterargument, other scholars suggest that young people are now utilizing new media, particularly the Internet, to fulfill their civic responsibilities, rather than relying on traditional forms of civic participation (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). This perspective emphasizes the shift in youth engagement from conventional activities to more informal ones facilitated by the Internet.

* Corresponding author. Addis Ababa University, Department of Sociology, 1176, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
E-mail addresses: Zenaw.alem@aau.edu.et (Z.A. Abebe), Kassahun.asres@aau.edu.et (K.A. Admassu), taye.negussie@aau.edu.et (T.N. Belayneh).

Since the groundbreaking work of Putnam in Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy (Putnam et al., 1993), scholars have emphasized the significance of political trust in maintaining the stability and effectiveness of democracy (Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Newton, 2006). In light of recent political and democratic crises worldwide, establishing trust among citizens in the political system and public institutions has emerged as a crucial factor in ensuring government stability and legitimacy (Mauk, 2021). Scholars argue that political trust is subject to fluctuations in response to changes in government, policy implementation, and economic downturns (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014). The erosion of confidence in public and political institutions is widely recognized as a fundamental element of democratic political culture. Consequently, the continued decline in levels of trust among citizens has raised concerns and stimulated discussions among sociologists, political scientists, and policymakers. As a result, research exploring the correlation between citizens' levels of political trust and their engagement in civic activities has produced contradictory and inconclusive findings.

While the relationship between civic engagement, political trust, and democratic values is well understood in Western societies, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the relationship between these concepts in emerging democracies and middle-income aspiring nations (Breuskin, 2012; Cvetanova & Naumovska, 2016; Kurtz, 2012; Ostrander, 2004; Zani & Barrett, 2012). Furthermore, research conducted in countries with weaker democratic institutions has produced inconclusive and inconsistent results. Therefore, it is essential to examine the impact of civic engagement on democratic support and political trust in non-Western contexts, particularly in nations with elected autocrats, particularly Ethiopia.

Following youth-led protests in Oromia that spread across Ethiopia, criticizing the autocratic regime and demanding political reform and socio-economic improvements, the country has undergone another political transition aimed at establishing a democratic government since late 2018. This transition has been characterized by a regime change described as a "play-within-a-play" (Abdi, 2019). Given that transitions to democratic governance occur rapidly while progress toward a democratic civil culture happens gradually (Jou, 2007), it is essential to examine the current dynamics of interaction between civic engagement, support for democracy, and political trust in Ethiopia through the lens of social capital theory.

Despite the increasing involvement of Ethiopian youth (ages 15 to 29) in informal political activities, their participation in formal political processes remains limited. This raises questions about the role of civic engagement in fostering political trust and support for democracy in the country. However, there is a lack of understanding regarding how these dynamics interact, particularly among youth in public universities during Ethiopia's complex transition toward democratization. Therefore, this study examines the relationship between civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy among students at Addis Ababa University (AAU). It focuses on the following research questions: (1) What forms of civic engagement among students at Addis Ababa University influence their levels of political trust? (2) What is the relationship between different forms of civic engagement among students at Addis Ababa University and their support for or preference for democracy?

The significance of this study can be understood by examining the context in which it was conducted. First, while Ethiopian youth actively participate in informal political activities, such as protests and demonstrations, they are less engaged in formal political processes, including elections, public meetings, and membership in political parties (Getachew, 2020). This trend is partly due to Ethiopia's politically polarized society where young people, particularly those under 29, have limited opportunities to engage in institutional political and decision-making processes. This barrier represents a significant obstacle to the nation's progress toward establishing a democratic system. Second, the presence of an authoritarian political culture, fragile democratic institutions, and widespread corruption within Ethiopia's political landscape further restricts youth involvement in the democratization process. Consequently, this study is vital to enhancing our understanding of the complex relationship between individual-level civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy among Ethiopian youth, particularly those attending public universities.

2. Study context

During the 1960s, Ethiopian students were significantly influenced by Pan-Africanism, Marxism, and socialist ideologies, which prompted them to challenge Emperor Haile Selassie's autocratic rule (Kelecha, 2023). Their protests were fueled by concerns over inequality, political oppression, and the quest for social justice, political freedoms, and economic opportunities for all Ethiopians. As the country grappled with widespread famine, corruption, and human rights abuses in the late 1960s and early 1970s anti-regime movements gained momentum. These movements advocated for democratic reforms, social change, and the inclusion of marginalized groups. Notably, students at Addis Ababa University (AAU) played a crucial role in this national political and social movement. Ultimately, in 1974, the monarchy was overthrown due to Emperor Haile Selassie's failure to address urgent societal issues (Kelecha, 2023).

Haile Selassie's removal was followed by the establishment of a military regime known as the Derg. On September 12, 1974, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam led a coup that brought the Derg to power. However, its rule was characterized by authoritarianism, human rights violations, and a centralized command economy. Consequently, opposition to the Derg regime quickly emerged from various groups. As the regime became increasingly repressive, many university student activists faced persecution, imprisonment, and execution. In response, a group of students from Addis Ababa University, who sought political change, social justice, and democracy, decided to continue their opposition and fight the regime from the deserts of Dedebit, ultimately establishing the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in collaboration with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), fought against the Derg regime. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) also played a vital role in supporting and organizing these rebel groups. In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of various rebel factions, launched a successful military campaign against the Derg dictatorship. Ultimately, on May 28, 1991, the TPLF-led EPRDF forces captured Addis Ababa, the capital city (Burke, 2020).

After assuming power, the EPRDF regime implemented a range of policies and reforms, including decentralization, ethnic federalism, and affirmative action for historically marginalized groups. These initiatives were designed to address historical grievances, promote regional autonomy, and foster inclusive governance. However, the EPRDF regime faced significant criticism for imprisoning opposition parties, restricting freedom of expression, and committing egregious human rights abuses (Sarah, 2003). Over the years, university students have become pivotal actors in political movements and social change, actively participating in campaigns for political reform and expressing their dissatisfaction with the EPRDF leadership.

In 2018, Ethiopia experienced a significant political transition following the widespread unrest that erupted in 2015 (Badwaza & Temin, 2018). The demands for political reform and the extensive protests that occurred in 2015 led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and subsequent changes in the political landscape. In 2019, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) restructured itself to establish a new political alliance called the Prosperity Party. Following this, the new government, led by the Prosperity Party, committed to promoting pluralism, democracy, and the expansion of civic and political space. However, critics argue that the reform process aimed at democratizing the country was ultimately

short-lived. Evidence suggests that the efforts made by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and his party have been less successful in consolidating democracy, addressing ethnic divisions, mitigating the polarized political climate, and ensuring sustainable peace (Semir, 2022, pp. 1–54; Yonas, 2019, pp. 1–34).

3. Theoretical framework

The interplay between active citizen engagement and the quality of democracy has long been a central theme in democratic theory within the fields of sociology and political science. This concept can be traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal work, "Democracy in America" (1835–1840), and is echoed in Robert Putnam's influential study, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" (1995). Both scholars emphasize how citizens' participation in community affairs can strengthen democratic values. Furthermore, normative political scientists and cultural political scientists argue that active involvement in civic matters is essential for transitioning from authoritarian regimes to democratic governance.

To delve deeper into this relationship, the theory of social capital serves as a crucial framework for examining civic engagement and its implications for governance, democratization, and peacebuilding (Cho et al., 2020; Enchikova et al., 2019). Prominent sociologists such as Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Paxton (2002) have explored the concept of social capital; however, it was Putnam's "Making Democracy Work" (1993) that effectively illustrated the importance of social capital: defined as networks, norms, and trust in understanding various political behaviors and attitudes across different contexts. Therefore, given the relevance of social capital theory in analyzing topics related to citizens' political behavior and attitudes, this study employs social capital, particularly Putnam's (1994) framework, to investigate the relationship between civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy.

The literature reveals a strong correlation between civic engagement and political trust, suggesting that active participation in civic activities can enhance citizens' confidence in government institutions (Chu & Shen, 2017; Duvsjö, 2014). However, some contrasting perspectives challenge this view, arguing that decreased participation in organizations and electoral processes does not necessarily lead to increased trust in political entities or bolster support for democracy (Berger, 2009; Stoyan et al., 2015). While many scholars demonstrate that civic engagement strengthens citizens' trust in government institutions, others contend that declining organizational memberships correlate with a decrease in trust in political institutions within established democracies. Ultimately, this trend raises concerns about citizens' disillusionment with democracy itself.

Given the divergent and inconclusive findings regarding the relationships among civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy, further research is essential to identify which forms of civic engagement most significantly influence these two concepts. In the context of Ethiopia, where democratic practices are still underdeveloped, it is crucial to explore how civic engagement affects political trust and support for democracy. This study is particularly focuses on young university students, as understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights into the potential for nurturing democratic values in emerging democracies like Ethiopia.

4. Methodology

This study adopted a positivist perspective, utilizing a quantitative, cross-sectional, and explanatory research design. This approach facilitates the objective measurement of variables, enabling the identification of patterns and relationships that can be generalized to a broader population.

Given Ethiopia's complex political dynamics and the significant role of youth in democratic processes, this research design provides empirical insights into how civic engagement influences political attitudes. The methodology employed in this study helped the researchers to reveal the multifaceted nature of youth civic engagement and its diverse effects on political trust and support for democracy.

Data for this study were collected in May 2022 through a survey of undergraduate students at the Main Campus of Addis Ababa University. Participants were randomly selected using a lottery method from nine departments across three colleges: the College of Language Studies, Journalism, and Communications; the College of Social Sciences; and the College of Education and Behavioral Studies. This simple random sampling approach ensured a fair and unbiased selection process. These colleges were chosen because their students were expected to have a heightened interest in civic and political engagement compared to students in other academic disciplines.

To establish the sampling frame, the researchers compiled a complete list of all enrolled students at the colleges from the registrar's office records. The total population of the students was 1,277. The sample size was calculated using a priori power analysis (G*Power version 3.1.9.7) and accounted for a 5% anticipated non-response rate. This ensured the selection of an adequate and representative sample. Therefore, the findings from this sample can be generalized to the entire population.

The survey questionnaires were distributed to students while they were in their lecture rooms during free time. The students completed the questionnaires by hand within 20 min. However, 5 out of the 270 questionnaires were discarded due to poor quality (many missing values). As a result, the analysis considered data from 265 respondents, all of whom voluntarily provided written consent to participate in the study.

The independent variable in this study is civic engagement. It is defined as a broad range of social and political actions that citizens undertake intending to address public issues. It is a multidimensional concept that encompasses variables interrelated variables: online political engagement, (2) offline political engagement, (3) voting, (4) volunteerism, and (5) problem-solving within the community. items used to measure these variables were adopted from civic engagement survey scales developed by Andolina et al. (2003), Ferrucci et al. (2020), and Syvertsen et al. (2015).

Online political engagement is a variable with an eight-item scale that measures the extent to which respondents evaluate their engagement in various activities related to political voice via social media over the past 12 months. The items include contacting a government official or party representative, commenting on a political news story or blog post, posting one's stance on a political issue, attending a political meeting, encouraging others to act on a political issue, following a political activist or political group, promoting a political party or politician, and circulating a humorous video that is related to a political issue or meeting.

Offline political engagement is a concept with an eleven-item scale that measures the extent to which respondents evaluate their engagement in various activities related to political voice over the past 12 months. The items include signing a paper petition about a political issue, attending a political rally or speech, taking part in a peaceful protest or demonstration, physically contacting a public official or politician to express your political opinion, and having experience working for a political party or candidate, discussing political issues with your friends, listening to the radio, watching TV, or reading magazines to get political news or information, being a member of a political party, being a member of a group other than a political party that tries to influence government policy or politics, dressing a piece of cloth or t-shirt with political content, and donating money to a political organization or candidate.

Volunteerism is a concept with a ten-item scale that measures the extent to which respondents evaluate their engagement in various organizations to benefit the community over the past 12 months. The items include volunteering in a religious group or church, an organization for environmental protection or animal rights, an organization for peace, an

organization for cultural activities or hobbies, a sports club, an organization providing aid for internally displaced people or other immigrants, a social club or group working for the elderly, homeless, children, women, and people with mental illness, an organization for science or education, a social club for anti-corruption, and a professional association or club in your field of study or future career.

Voting is a single question that asks whether respondents have voted or not during the sixth national general election held in Ethiopia in 2021. Addressing community issues, conversely, involves evaluating whether individuals have collaborated informally with others to tackle challenges within the community.

The response options pertaining to online and offline political engagement, volunteerism, and addressing community issues were categorized as (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Occasionally, (4) Frequently, and (5) Always. The variables were assessed at the scale level of measurement. Conversely, addressing issues within the community was converted from a 5-point Likert scale to a categorical variable and were assessed at a nominal level. Similarly, voting behavior was also assessed at a nominal level. The response choices for both variables were categorized as No (1) and Yes (2).

The dependent variables of this study are political trust and support for democracy. Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in political and public institutions—legislature, executives, judiciaries, and the media. It is a concept with a nine-item scale that measures the extent to which the respondents have confidence in governmental and political institutions over the past 12 months. The items that measure political trust include (1) the police, (2) the courts, (3) the parliament, (4) the opposition political parties, (5) the ruling party, (6) the National Defense Force (NDF), (7) the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), (8) the mass media, and (9) the PM office. Responses to the questions are as follows: "Not at All (1)," "To Very Little Extent (2)," "To Some Extent (3)," "To Great Txtent (4)," and "To a Very Great Extent (5)."

Support for democracy refers to citizens' preference for democratic governance over alternative systems, such as authoritarianism. It is a concept with a four-item scale that measures the respondent's democracy-autocracy preference (Chu & Shen, 2017; Dalton & Shin, 2004). The items that measure this concept include: (1) a strong leader who does not have to bother with a parliament, and elections should decide everything in this country; (2) the army comes in to govern the country; (3) having experts, not the government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country; and (4) while democracy may have problems, it is still the best form of government for the country. The first three indicators of autocracy preference were reverse coded to give the same meaning as the fourth item, which directly measures the preference for democracy. All four indicators of democratic value were measured using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (4), with response items coded so that higher values represent a higher or greater level of support for democracy. This construct was measured at the scale level.

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v. 26 was used to analyze the data. The analysis employs a composite score derived from the components of online political engagement, offline political engagement, volunteerism, political trust, and support for democracy. Mean, standard deviation (SD), and percentage are used to describe respondents' socio-demographic characteristics as well as their level of civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy. An independent sample T-tests and a linear regression models, based on the nature of the variables, were used to assess whether different forms of respondents' civic engagement influence their levels of political trust and support for democracy. Before analyzing the results of the test and model, the assumptions were scrutinized. The results show that all the assumptions are fulfilled.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, the researchers implemented several strategies. First, the survey questionnaire was developed following a thorough review of relevant literature on the

subject. This review encompassed pertinent literature from existing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings, enabling the researchers to craft items that accurately capture the constructs under investigation. By aligning the items conceptually with the constructs of interest, the instrument's content validity was bolstered. Furthermore, experts well-versed in the topic provided feedback on the data collection instrument to verify its validity. These experts brought a wealth of knowledge to the table, allowing the researchers to assess the questionnaire for clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Their input helped identify potential ambiguities or shortcomings in the instrument, allowing researchers to refine and improve its quality.

Moreover, an exploratory factor analysis using a theory-driven principal axis factoring approach was conducted to establish a concise measurement scale for the three civic engagement variables, political trust, and support for democracy. This analytical technique contributed to the development of a robust measurement scale, ensuring the validity and reliability of the data collected (see Table 1). Following the results obtained from principal axis factoring, a compositeindex scale derived from items on online political engagement, offline political engagement, volunteerism, political trust, and support for democracy was employed in the statistical analysis.

5. Results

5.1. Respondents' profile

The age of the study respondents ranged from 18 and 29 years (M = 21.7, SD = 1.5, N = 265). While one hundred sixty (60.4%) of them were men, one hundred sixty-eight (63.4%) came from urban areas of the country. One hundred fifty-six (58.9%) of the study respondents identified their ethnic backgrounds, and one hundred nine (41.1%) refused to report which ethnic group they belong. Accordingly, those who have identified their ethnic affiliation are from Amhara (77), Agew (5), Oromo (58), Kafficho (1), Tigre (4), Shinasha (1), Wolayita (2), Hadiya (2), Gedieo (1), and Gurage (5). Finally, two hundred fifty-two (95%) of the study respondents reported that they are religious persons.

5.2. Civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy

According to the mean score results in Table 2, respondents rarely engaged in online political and offline political activities, but they occasionally participated in volunteerism. Additionally, respondents agreed with supporting democracy and having some level of trust in public and political organizations. In contrast, while 92 (34.7%) of respondents voted in the country's 6th National General Election held in June and September 2021, 228 (86%) stated that they had taken part in community problem-solving activities.

5.3. Civic engagement vs political trust

Based on the data presented in Table 3, it is evident that there is a significant positive relationship between respondents' levels of trust in political and public institutions and their infrequent engagement in formal political activities. Specifically, the analysis indicates that approximately 9% of the variance in respondents' political trust can be attributed to their offline political engagement. This suggests that

Table 1

Results of a theory-driven principal axis factoring of different variables.

Scale	No. of Items	Mean (SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Online Political Engagement	7	16.42 (6.16)	.82
Offline Political Engagement	8	13.50 (5.77)	.85
Volunteerism	8	20.69 (7.58)	.87
Political Trust	5	12.1 (4.7)	.82
Support for Democracy	2	6.14 (1.54)	.55

Table 2
Descriptive statics of three latent variables of civic engagement (N = 265).

Variables	N	M (SD)
Online political engagement	265	2.05 (.77)
Offline political engagement	265	1.94 (.59)
Volunteerism	265	2.64 (.86)
Political trust	265	2.42 (.78)
Support for democracy	265	3.1 (.77)

limited offline political engagement contributes to an increase in respondents trust in public and political institutions by 9%.

Similarly, the data indicate a significant positive relationship between respondents' levels of political trust and their infrequent online political engagement. Approximately 2% of the variance in political trust is associated with online political engagement. In other words, rare online political engagement correlates with a 2% increase in students' trust in public and political institutions. However, the analysis reveals no significant relationship between respondents' levels of political trust as and their occasional engagement in volunteerism. Additionally, there are no significant differences in political trust levels based on whether respondents have voted or have occasionally participated in community problem-solving activities.

5.4. Civic engagement vs support for democracy

Table 4 shows that there is a strong negative relationship between respondents' support for democracy and their low levels of both offline and online political engagement, as well as their occasional participation in volunteer activities. Specifically, 4%, 2%, and 7% of the variance in respondents' support for democracy can be attributed to their offline political engagement, online political engagement, and volunteerism, respectively (see Table 4). This indicates that infrequent offline and

online political engagement, and occasional volunteerism decreased students' likelihood of supporting democracy by 4%, 2%, and 7%, respectively. Conversely, as shown in Table 4, there was no significant difference in respondents' support for democracy based on whether they had voted or participated in community problem-solving activities.

6. Discussion

Many scholars theorizing about democracy, particularly from a social capital perspective, have long argued that proactive civic engagement—whether political or social—ideally sustains democracy (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Jou, 2007; Mennell, 2017) and enhances confidence in public and political institutions as well as their representatives (Chu & Shen, 2017; Duvsjö, 2014; Putnam et al., 1993). Conversely, some researchers contend that civic engagement does not necessarily enhance citizens' trust in political and public institutions (Stoyan et al., 2015) or support for democracy (Enchikova et al., 2019). According to Putnam's theory of social capital, networks, norms, and trust facilitate cooperation among individuals, enabling them to achieve mutual benefits.

This research uncovered two unexpected findings regarding the engagement of AAU students in civic activities and its impact on political trust and support for democratic processes, thereby challenging traditional discussions within the fields of sociology and political science. First, their limited political activity—both online and offline—enhanced their trust in public and political institutions; however this same lack of engagement, alongside some volunteer work, undermined their support for democracy. Second, students' minimal participation in voting, volunteer activities, and community problem-solving did not correlate with their level of political trust, and neither voting nor community problem-solving influenced their democratic attitudes.

Two primary reasons may explain the positive relationship between offline political engagement, online political engagement, and trust

Table 3
The relationship between civic engagement and political trust (N = 265).

Political Trust	T	R^2	F	d	95% CI	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Offline political engagement	5.19 (.00)	.09	26.99		1.467	2.020
Online political engagement	2.09 (.03)	.02	4.39		1.792	2.418
Volunteerism	1.8 (.24)	.001	1.38		1.899	2.560
Voting	-.60 (.55)		1.79	.07	-.313	.166
Community problem-solving	-1.92 (.05)		.00	.35	-.646	.008

Table 4
The relationship between civic engagement and support for democracy (N = 265).

Support for Democracy	T	R^2	F	d	CI	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Offline political engagement	-3.49 (.00)	.04	12.14		3.216	3.682
Online political engagement	2.14 (.02)	.02	5.82		3.106	3.619
Volunteerism	-4.31 (.00)	.07	18.59		3.348	3.874
Voting	-.88 (.88)		.02	.10	-.281	.112
Community problem-solving	.33 (.83)		.05	.06	-.225	.314

among undergraduate students at AAU. First, even infrequent participation in offline political activities, such as attending rallies or donating to political parties, allows students to gain direct experience with the political system. This involvement fosters a better understanding of local politics, which can enhance political trust. This observation aligns with Putnam's (2000) assertion that firsthand participation in civic activities can help individuals better comprehend democratic processes, thereby increasing their trust in institutions. Second, even limited political participation can provide access to a wide ranges of information and perspectives through social media and other various forums and platforms. This exposure to diverse viewpoints enables students to have a more nuanced understanding of politics and institutions, ultimately leading to greater political trust.

Consistent with the findings of this study, other research has demonstrated a positive influence of both offline and online political engagement on students' trust in public and political institutions. Chu and Shen (2017) investigated the impact of civic engagement on institutional trust among 2,400 respondents aged 18 and older in South Africa, revealing a positive relationship between offline political participation—such as attending demonstrations and contacting government officials—and institutional trust. Conversely, other studies have produced mixed results. For instance, Lee (2018) found that electoral participation (voting) and institutionalized political engagement do not significantly affect political trust, whereas non-institutionalized political participation, such as posting political content online, has a notable impact.

In a broader sense, it has been argued that both online and offline political engagement help individuals gain a better understanding of the political system, which in turn fosters greater trust in these institutions. According to social capital theory, as articulated by its primary proponent, Robert Putnam, this assertion holds true. Putnam et al. (1993) emphasized that individuals who participate in collective action toward shared political goals develop a common understanding of the political system and its institutions, resulting in increased trust in the functioning of political and public institutions, although there are mixed findings in various socioeconomic and political contexts. However, it is crucial to note that while strong bonding social capital can enhance trust within close-knit groups, it does not necessarily promote broader support for democratic values across society.

Contrary to the popular belief that political engagement and volunteerism positively influence support for democracy among students, as revealed in the findings of this study, recent research suggests a negative relationship between these constructs. For instance, studies conducted by Ekman and Amnå (2012) and Berger (2009) indicate this trend, among others. Such unexpected results among students at AAU could be attributed to numerous factors. First, students who engage in offline political activities may become disillusioned with the democratic process due to witnessing corruption or inefficiencies within political institutions (Getachew, 2020). This sense of disillusionment may be linked to an awareness of deficiencies within the democratic framework, which can cultivate cynicism among active participants, thereby undermining their confidence in and support for democratic institutions (Dancey, 2012). Second, online political engagement may expose students to polarizing and extremist views (Bail et al., 2018), leading to a decline in their support for democratic values (Persily & Tucker, 2021). Third, though volunteerism is often seen as a positive civic activity, it may inadvertently undermine support for democracy if students perceive it as a substitute for political engagement that maintains the status quo, rather than challenging existing power structures and holding government officials accountable (Teets et al., 2022). Finally, students' engagement in political activities and volunteerism may lead to a sense of cynicism towards democratic governance if they perceive their involvement in political and social activities as ineffective in producing meaningful change (Henn et al., 2002).

Despite Putnam's argument in *Bowling Alone* that civic engagement and trust mutually reinforce one another, with each influencing the

other, the findings of this study revealed that engaging in voting, community problem-solving activities, and volunteerism has no relationship with political trust. Other researchers have produced consistent findings related to those of the current study. Possible reasons can be suggested for why such findings are convincing and acceptable, at least in diverse socioeconomic and political contexts, including our study area. In many developing countries, including Ethiopia, the electoral process may be marred by a lack of competition and voter suppression tactics, which limit the participation of certain groups of citizens. As a result, citizens tend to lose faith in the electoral process and may not trust the political system. This is consistent with Putnam's assertion that a decrease in civic engagement, particularly in environments characterized by low political efficacy, may result in diminished trust and support for democratic institutions.

On the other hand, according to some scholars of social capital theory, not all forms of civic engagement result in increased political trust. While volunteerism may help form social relationships, networks, and norms, it is not always associated with developing trust in public institutions and political actors. Indeed, the inherently localized character of volunteerism may restrict its influence on wider political matters, leading to a disjunction between community involvement and trust in government institutions. This could be because volunteerism frequently occurs in localized and specialized settings, such as community-based organizations or issue-specific campaigns, where the emphasis is on achieving specific goals rather than on broader sociopolitical issues. As a result, it may not be related to efforts to build public trust. Likewise, community problem-solving activities often address specific local issues or concerns and thus may not relate to broader political processes or impact political trust. Many young citizens in public universities develop a perception of a disconnect between community-level activities and broader political institutions, which may limit their direct involvement in community problem-solving activities while leaving their confidence in political and public institutions unchanged.

Finally, in contrast to Putnam's (2001) claim, the current study demonstrated that voting and community problem-solving activities did not affect support for democracy. Given the limited agency experienced by citizens in developing countries, such as Ethiopia, individuals may perceive that their involvement in these activities does not lead to meaningful change, further weakening their commitment to democratic values. As many would argue, in developing countries, citizens may have limited agency to make changes in their communities through community problem-solving activities and voting. Thus, citizens may perceive that their engagements will not lead to any meaningful change, resulting in a disfavor toward supporting democratic values.

7. Conclusion

Having analyzed the complex relationship between students' engagement, political trust, and attitudes toward democracy, this study reveals that not all forms of civic engagement exert thesame influence on trust in political institutions or support for democracy (Berger, 2009; Stoyan et al., 2015). Despite criticism of social capital theory and its major proponents, including Putnam, the findings of the current study show that only some forms of civic engagement do positively influence an individual's trust in public and political institutions. Furthermore, the results of this study regarding the relationship between various forms of civic participation and support for democracy are consistent with literature that challenges the main argument of social capital advocates: that civic participation, in any form, necessarily leads to the development of positive attitudes toward democracy.

Putnam's social capital theory offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing the complex interplay between civic engagement, political trust, and support for democratic governance. In this vein, the results of this study emphasize the necessity of recognizing the intricacies inherent in these relationships, especially within sociopolitical

environments characterized by limited democratic practices and deep-rooted social rifts. Thus, the study reveals that civic engagement does not consistently bolster support for democratic principles or institutional trust, thereby filling a significant void in the current literature. This study particularly sheds light on the diverse nature of civic participation among youth in authoritarian regimes, focusing on the youth demographic within public universities.

This implies that both researchers and policymakers need to move beyond a general definition of civic engagement and consider the specific political and social activities which individuals undertake within their communities. To adequately address this complex relationship, future research on the connections between civic engagement and political trust, as well as support for democracy, must also account for latent forms of civic engagement. Furthermore, to gain a deeper contextual understanding of how youth civic engagement affects political trust and support for democracy, future studies should focus on youth beyond the confines of public universities in Ethiopia.

Given the current study's findings, public and political institutions must create an open and inclusive environment for dialogue among university students. This approach, in turn, would foster trust between students and these institutions. Policymakers in Ethiopia should also demonstrate their commitment to protecting media spaces. They should also enable students' political engagement through policies that enhance the exercise of freedom of expression and individual rights. These measures, in turn, would positively shape students' attitudes toward democracy, and their social and political engagement would help consolidate democratic governance in this country. Moreover, political parties, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), and other public institutions should undergo comprehensive institutional reform. As reformed institutions gain greater trust and support from citizens, students will be more inclined to engage civically and contribute to the enhancement of democratic culture in Ethiopia.

This study's strength lies in its use of modified, reliable measurement scales specifically designed to assess youth civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy in countries with elected autocracies. This, in turn, helped the researchers gain valuable insights into the relationships among these variables using trustworthy data. However, the study does have certain limitations. First, it did not address causal relationships between the independent and dependent variables. Second, it failed to demonstrate changes over time in students' engagement, trust in public and political institutions, and support for democracy, and it did not control for socio-demographic covariates. Hence, future research in Ethiopia and similar socio-economic and political contexts should employ pre- and post-tests as well as longitudinal designs to demonstrate changes over time and establish causal relationships, thereby uncovering the intricate connections between civic engagement, political trust, and support for democracy. It is also recommended that future studies utilize advanced statistical methods, such as one-way Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) and sequential multiple regression, to account for covariates and gain a better understanding of the impact of civic engagement on political trust and democratic support in countries with limited democratic practices.

Funding

Consent to participate

As far as research ethics are concerned, the study participants were given a thorough briefing on the research purpose, anonymity, and confidentiality. In addition, participants voluntarily signed written consent to participate in the study.

Appendix: author credit statement

The principal author designed the study, collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data, and drafted the manuscript of the article. The co-authors gave guidance and commented on the design of the study, the data collection tool, and the manuscript.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Zenaw Alem Abebe: Writing – original draft, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kassahun Asres Admassu:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Taye Negussie Belayneh:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests.

We the undersigned agree with all the above.

Acknowledgments

References

Abdi, A. (2019). Ethiopia's burgeoning democratic transition: New glamour or new leadership gimmicks? *Hungarian Journal of African Studies [Afrika Tanulmányok], 13* (5), 13–31.

Andolina, M., Keeter, S., Zukin, C., & Jenkins, K. (2003). A guide to the index of civic and political engagement. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267399505.

Armingeon, K., & Guthmann, K. (2014). Democracy in crisis? The declining support for national democracy in European countries, 2007–2011. *European Journal of Political Research, 53*(3), 423–442. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12046

Badwaza, Y., & Temin, J. (2018). Reform in Ethiopia: Turning promise into progress. *Freedom house*.

Bail, A. C., Argyle, L., Brown, T., Bumpus, J., Chen, H., Hunzaker, F., Lee, J., Mann, M., Merhout, F., & Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 115*(37), 9216–9221. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115

Banaji, S., & Buckingham, D. (2010). Young people, the internet, and civic participation: An overview of key findings from the CivicWeb project. *International Journal of Learning and Media, 2*(1), 15–24. https://doi.org/10.1162/ijlm_a_00038

Berger, B. (2009). Political theory, political science, and the end of civic engagement. *Perspectives on Politics, 7*(2), 335–350. https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-poli-sci/7.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *In handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). New York: Greenwood Press.

Breuskin, I. (2012). *Social capital and governmental institutions. Living Reviews in Democracy* (Vol. 3, pp. 1–13). http://www.livingreviews.org/lrd-2012-1.

Burke, J. (2020). Rise and fall of Ethiopia's TPLF–from rebels to rulers and back. *The Guardian*.

Cho, A., Byrne, J., & Pelter, Z. (2020). *Digital civic engagement by young people*. UNICEF.

Chu, Y., & Shen, C. (2017). Civic engagement and institutional trust among South Africans. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, 44*(3). https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3878

Coleman, J. S. (1988). *Social capital in the creation of human capital* (Vol. 94, pp. S95–S120).

Coleman, S., & Blumler, J. (2009). The internet and democratic citizenship: Theory, practice and policy. *Information, Communication & Society, 13*(8). https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2010.512637

Cvetanova, G., & Naumovska, B. (2016). Democratic values and political attitudes in the Macedonian young people. *European Quarterly of Political Attitudes and Mentalities, 5* (2), 56–69.

Dalton, R., & Shin, D. (2004). *Democratic aspirations and democratic ideals. CSD center for the study of democracy an organized research unit*. Irvine: University of California.

Dancey, L. (2012). The consequences of political cynicism: How cynicism shapes citizens' reactions to political scandals. *Political Behavior, 34*(3). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-011-9163-z

Duvsjö, J. K. (2014). What is affecting political trust? A comparative study on europe (Master's thesis). https://lnu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:788098/FULLTEXT01.pdf.

Ekman, J., & Amnå, E. (2012). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs, 22*(3), 283–300. https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1

Enchikova, E., Neves, T., Mejias, S., Kalmus, V., Cicognani, E., & Ferreira, P. D. (2019). Civic and political participation of European youth: Fair measurement in different cultural And social contexts. *Frontiers in Education, 4*(10), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2019.00010

Ferrucci, P., Hopp, T., & Vargo, C. J. (2020). Civic engagement, social capital, and ideological extremity: Exploring online political engagement and political expression on Facebook. *New Media & Society, 22*(6), 1095–1115. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819873110

Getachew, M. S. (2020). Factors that affect youth political participation in Ethiopia: Its impacts on the democratization process. *Journal of Political Science and International Relations, 3*(3), 61–69. https://doi.org/10.11648/j.jpsir.20200303.13

Henn, M., Weinstein, M., & Wring, D. (2002). A generation apart? Youth and political Participation in Britain. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations, 4*(2), 167–192. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.t01-1-00001

Jou, W. (2007). Does social capital lead to support for democracy in East Asia?. *UC irvine symposium: Democracy and its development 2005-2011.* https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4gd0s7t3.

Kelecha, M. (2023). Political and ideological legacy of Ethiopia's contested nation-building: A focus on contemporary Oromo politics. *Journal of Asian and African Studies, 0*(0), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231161036

Kurtz, J. (2012). In *Civic engagement of Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: An analysis of key drivers and outcomes*.

Lanero, A., Luis, J., & Sahelices, C. (2018). Types of associations and motivations to join: A study with young people in Spain. *Ekonomski Vjesnik, 32*(2), 233–244. https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/313356.

Lee, S. (2018). *Welfare attitudes, political trust, and its determinants in Sweden.* Master's Thesis, Lund University, Department of Sociology.

Li, X. (2019). Rethinking youth policy model in Europe and its constituents: Civic learning and civic engagement. *Urban Research & Practice, 13*(1), 97–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2019.1667135

Marien, S., & Hooghe, M. (2011). Does political trust matter? An empirical investigation into the relation between political trust and support for law compliance. *European Journal of Political Research, 50*(2), 267–291. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2010.01930.x

Matsela, T. (2015). *Exploring youth participation in community development organizations in the Western Cape. (Thesis)*. University of Cape Town, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Social Development. http://hdl.handle.net/11427/13743.

Mauk, M. (2021). Stable support for democracy in East and Southeast Asia? Examining citizens' trust in democratic institutions. *East Asia*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-021-09381-y

Mennell, S. (2017). Guest editors' introduction: comparative historical Sociology as antidote to the 'crackpot realism' of the twenty-first century. *Human Figurations: Long-term Perspectives on the Human Condition, 6*(2). http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0006.201.

Newton, K. (2006). Political support: Social capital, civil society and political and economic performance. *Political Studies, 54*(4), 846–864. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2006.00634.x

Ostrander, S. A. (2004). Democracy, civic participation, and the University: A comparative study of civic engagement on Five campuses. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 33*(1), 74–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764003260588

Paxton, P. (2002). Social capital and democracy: An interdependent relationship. *American Sociological Review, 67*(2), 254. https://doi.org/10.2307/3088895

Persily, N., & Tucker, A. J. (2021). Social media and democracy: The state of the field, Prospects for reform. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 26*(2), 505–512. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220985078

Putnam, R. D. (1994). Social capital and public affairs. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 47*(8), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/3824796

Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy, 6*(1), 65–78. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1995.0002

Putnam, R. (2001). Civic disengagement in contemporary America. *Spring, 36*(2), 135–156. https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00059

Putnam, R. D., Leonardi, R., & Nanetti, R. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s8r7

Robinson, C. R. (2019). (Re) Theorizing civic engagement: Foundations for Black Americans civic engagement theory. *Sociology Compass, 13*(9). https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12728

Sarah, V. (2003). *Ethnicity and power in Ethiopia.* The University of Edinburgh.

Semir, Y. (2022). *Ethiopia's democratic predicaments: State–society dynamics and the balance of power.* Institute for Security Studies.

Stoyan, A. T., Niedzwiecki, S., Morgan, J., Hartlyn, J., & Espinal, R. (2015). Trust in government institutions: The effects of performance and participation in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. *International Political Science Review, 37*(1), 18–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512114534703

Syvertsen, A. K., Wray-Lake, L., & Metzger, A. (2015). Youth civic and character measures toolkit. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.2413.9602.

Teets, J., Hasmath, R., Hildebrandt, T., Hsu, C. L., & Hsu, J. Y. J. (2022). Volunteerism and democratic learning in an authoritarian state: The case of China. *Democratization, 29*(5), 879–898. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2015334

Yonas, A. (2019). *Universities as contested terrain: Making sense of violent conflicts in Ethiopian universities.* Working paper. CARD.

Zani, B., & Barrett, M. (2012). Engaged citizens? Political participation and social engagement among youth, women, minorities, and migrants. *Human Affairs, 22*(3), 273–282. https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0023-2