



# Journal of Emerging Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-7898](#) P-ISSN: [3006-788X](#)

Volume 2, Issue 4, 2025, 42-58



## Barriers to Youth Political Participation in Pakistan: Examining the Role of NGOs and CBOs

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### Article Information

### ABSTRACT

#### Received:

2025-09-30

#### Revised:

2025-10-23

#### Accepted:

2025-11-09

#### Keywords

Youth Participation;  
Non-Governmental  
NGOs; Barriers;  
Gender; Students;  
Politics.

This study investigates those obstacles that discourage youth to participate in politics in Pakistan and role of Non-Governmental and Community-Based Organizations (NGOs and CBOs) to overcome them. Data were collected from 191 university students, the results reveal that the primary limitations are the safety concerns, academic workload, and distrust to the political institutions. Though NGOs and CBOs offer avenues of civic learning, correlation and regression analyses indicate that there is no significant relationship or effect of engagement and perceived barriers. There were no significant differences in terms of demographics or gender implications that would suggest that political disengagement is a feature of youth, in general. Civic awareness is promoted by NGOs and CBOs but has no power to eliminate systemic and psychological obstacles, which indicates that institutional cooperation and increased civic education are needed.



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Publisher: Institute for Educating Environmental Resilience and Governance

## Introduction

Youth political engagement is key to the development and survival of democratic politics. For emerging democracies such as Pakistan, with a demographic bulge that is disproportionately young (above the age of 30) in its population, the dormant power of these youth to reset and shape the political landscape is critically important (Rossi, 2009; Weiss, 2020).

The number and quality of young people's political participation is a key factor in the building and sustainability of democratic governance. In emerging democracies like Pakistan, where a demographic explosion of the younger population up to the age of 30 is a vast majority of the population, the potential of the young citizens to revitalize and restructure the politics is considered of utmost significance (Rossi 2009; Weiss 2020).

According to the Secretariat (2016), the deliberate inclusion and strengthening of younger generations in the civic and political space guarantees that plural societies use different mechanisms of governance, which materially contribute to the consolidation of sustainable peace. Moreover, although demographically prominent, youth participation in formal aspects of politics (such as voting and protesting) is strikingly limited in comparison to their participation in informal domains of politics.

The general election of 2024 in Pakistan offers a significant example, with the voter turnout level of only 47.6 out of an electorate of 128.6 million, which shows only a weakening grasp of electoral mobilizations of African nations. These barriers include rampant political disaffection, deep-rooted socio-economic disparities and latent political exclusion (Election Commission of Pakistan, 2024).

Moreover, the effect of these structural constraints is compounded by the nature of endemic dynastic political monopolies and the absence of institutionalized channels through which real youth might be guaranteed a minimum of substantive political representation in the formal political system (Zaheer, 2016).

The lack of strong participation is especially problematic in this modern day, where non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) mediate

youth agency and political engagement development ground, increasingly (Sperber & McClendon, 2022). Civil-society organizations are important in enhancing democratic participation, particularly in the states that face challenges in engaging youth in the political processes at the state level (Boulding, 2010).

In Pakistan, these groups have been key mediators that have allowed youths to become involved in politics through campaigning at the grassroots level on issues-based education and mobilization (Ahmad et al., 2019; Rafique and Khoo, 2018). By crossing sectors, such as education, health and human rights, non-state actors want to bring about civic and political participation amongst marginalized young demographics and university students (Suresh et al., 2023). They have the power to question power structures, organize communities and hold state institutions accountable (Suresh et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2020). However, the overall effectiveness of these organizations in deconstructing socio-economic and gender-based barriers is not well-understood and less explored in the Pakistani context (Tunio et al., 2021).

Understanding the intersection of these barriers with the efforts made by NGOs and CBOs is important when evaluating the youth's inclusion in democratic processes. This paper analyses the major barriers to youth political participation in Pakistan and explores the impact of NGOs and CBOs to overcome those challenges. It also explores the impact of gender and demographic factors on the experience of these barriers (Zaheer, 2016; Malik, 2021; Rafique and Khoo, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2019).

The objectives of the study are the following specific ones:

- 1- To find out the major barriers that limit students' political participation.
- 2- To explore the relationship between engagement with NGOs/CBOs and barriers to political participation.
- 3- To investigate the impact of engagement with NGOs/CBOs on barriers to political participation.
- 4- To find out effect of demographic differences on engagement with NGOs/CBOs and barriers to political participation.

## Literature Review

Youth political participation has emerged as a concern of rising importance in Pakistan, in which the youth form the largest segment of the population in the country, yet are marginalized within political processes (Weiss, 2020). Despite their potential to enhance their demographic capacity to reinforce democratic governance, multifarious structural and cultural barriers remain, which restrain their engagements in civic, and political (Sperber & McClendon, 2022). This literature review focuses on youth engagement with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community zenith organizations (CBOs), the barriers that prevent from their political participation, and the demographic and gender variations that impact upon these experiences (Blais & Loewen, 2011; Rafique as well as Khoo, 2018).

### Engagement with NGOs and CBOs

NGOs and CBOs have become important institutions in the creation of democratic values and civic engagement among young people (Putnam, 2000; Bessant, 2004). They play an important role in leadership development and civic education, providing a platform for youth to voice their point of view and interact with governance processes (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013).

Youniss et al. (2002) and Sherrod et al. (2010) argued that civic volunteerism and organizational participation increase democratic participation and political responsibility of young persons. Likewise, Benn et al. (2014) highlighted the role of NGOs and CBOs in other forms of participation with groups who have often been excluded from formal political institutions. Within the Pakistani context, NGOs and CBOs have played a key role in providing youth with opportunities for participation in the community by participating in advocacy programs, awareness programs, and volunteer projects (Ahmed et al., 2021; Ullah & Malik, 2021). These organizations have been shown to help students overcome political apathy and alienation by exposing them to participatory experiences that help them gain political confidence (Kahne et al., 2015). Consequently, the functions of engagement of NGOs and CBOs are both a mechanism of learning and a mechanism of access to

participation which enable providing young people with social and political competences encountered to become active citizens. Thereby, despite this increasing acknowledgement, the lack of quantitative inquiries that analyze how different types of participation (volunteerism, training, digital campaign) are related to political action and their engagement with NGOs/CBOs reduces the barriers to political participation among university students.

### Barriers to Political Participation

In spite of the benefits of organizational engagement, young people's political participation is often impeded by individual, organizational, and structural obstacles. Verba, et al., (1995) recognize primordial barriers like time, skills, sense of involvement and entrance into the political structure. Norris, (2002) and Dalton, (2008) stress that political alienation, disenchantment and ingrown politics reduce youth's inclination towards public life.

These problems are particularly relevant in the context of Pakistan, where the administrations of universities often restrain student political mobilization, and general socio-political dynamics have fostered a culture of victim-hood. Scholarly studies conducted by Zaidi (2022), Cammaerts et al., (2016), Zheng et al., (2016), and Galston (2021) showcase that institutionalized oppressions, dominant social norms, and the lack of civic education are concertedly leading to the dilution of democratic participation and are contributing to the apathy of students.

Hence, the intervention of NGOs and CBOs is likely to be crucial in reducing these barriers. Kahne et al., (2015) suggest that CBOs offer safe, caring environments where youth can learn political information, develop assertiveness and develop resilience to exclusion. Terriquez & Lin (2020) state that NGO participation is empowering and mentoring practice that works against alienation. From the Pakistani side, according to Barrech & Kakar (2019) students who meet NGOs have lower political cynicism and higher civic participation tendencies.

### Demographic and Gender Differences

Demographic characteristics - particularly gender, age, socio-economic status, and education level - continue to have an effect on the level and nature

of young people's political engagement. Kam & Palmer (2008) and Pontes et al., (2018) state that citizens with higher socioeconomic and educational capital have better access to information on politics, civic competencies, and social networks for participation. Conversely, young people from low-income or rural environments are often lacking exposure, confidence and institutional support for meaningful political participation (Zaheer, 2016). Gender remains a key driver in determining differential patterns of young people's participation in civic and political space.

Gender nevertheless continues to be a powerful determinant in explaining differential participation of the young in civic and political life. In Pakistan, female students have even more barriers because of the cultural norms, family restrictions, and lack of mobility and leadership opportunities (Malik 2021). These restrictions on gender are combined with class and locality, resulting in differential access to participation and the perpetuation of pre-existing social inequalities. Furthermore, because educational and political institutions are dominated by patriarchy, these inequalities are reinforced, allowing their continuation in contexts where female voices are silenced and political agency is restricted (Bukhari et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, NGOs and CBOs can potentially play a critical role in reducing disparities based on demographics and gender. Rafique and Khoo (2018) and Ahmad et al. (2019) find that these organizations offer young women and marginalized students' mentorship, leadership training and advocacy efforts that serve to strengthen civic confidence. Moreover, they enforce gender organizational programs that are meant to promote parity in participation for male and female students in public affair and community activism. While previous studies have emphasized the role of NGOs and CBOs in promoting civic engagement and participation (Putnam, 2000; Benn et al., 2014; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013), limited quantitative evidence exists on whether these initiatives effectively reduce gender-specific barriers in Pakistan's higher education context. Most existing studies emphasize youth civic involvement in general, but do not differentiate the demographic and gender variables that influence the relationship between NGOs and CBOs' engagement and reduce the

barriers of political participation (Ahmed et al., 2021). Therefore, addressing the gap this study addresses these gaps by investigating the relationship between NGOs/CBOs engagement and barriers to political participation, and by examining the demographic and gender-based differences in students' experiences of these barriers in Pakistan.

Based on the review of literature and the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses have been formulated:

- H1:** There is a significant positive relationship between students' engagement with NGOs and CBOs and the barriers to political participation.
- H2:** There is a significant positive impact of students' engagement with NGOs and CBOs on the barriers to political participation.
- H3:** There are significant demographic differences in engagement with NGOs and CBOs and barriers to political participation.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

The current study adopted a quantitative research design. The methodological decision is in line with the accepted traditions of conducting political and civic studies, where the survey-based indicators would be applied to assess the impact that the individual characteristics and organizational engagement have on the political behavior and participation (Checkoway, 2012; Kahne and Westheimer, 2006; Quintelier, 2007; Verba et al., 1995; Zukin et al., 2006).

### Study Participants

The target population consisted of university students from both public and private sector institutions in Pakistan. A total of 191 respondents participated in the study, representing different age groups, educational levels, and socio-economic backgrounds (Farid & Ashraf, 2025). The sample consisted of University students, the population that is considered one of the important groups of politically conscious and potentially active citizens (Anjum et al., 2024).

### Sampling Technique

The study employed a stratified random sampling technique because such sampling technique

(Etikan et al., 2016). The levels of education, type of university (public or private) and region of study were used as the stratification variables. The methodology is in line with the best practices in the research of youth engagement and considers institutional and regional diversity of the sample (Patton, 2015).

### **Instrument**

A structured questionnaire was prepared and used to gather primary data. The instrument consisted of several sections which measured (1) demographic information, (2) level of engagement with NGOs and CBOs, (3) perceived barriers to political participation. The questionnaire items were based on previously validated scales (Verba et al., 1995; Norris, 2002; Kahne et al., 2015). Responses were scored on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data was collected using both on-line and face-to-face surveys. Respondents were reached through the networks of the universities, student associations, and youth forums linked with the

NGOs and CBOs. Participation was voluntary and respondents were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and confidential (Jahan, 2021).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants were notified of the aims and purposes of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage. No personal identifying information was collected, and the information was only used for academic uses. The study followed institutional ethical guidelines in respect of the privacy of the data and voluntary participation (Creswell, 2014).

### **Reliability and Validity of the Instrument**

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted among a small group of university students. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were between .817 and .936, which is higher than the minimum acceptable level of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), and the items did a good job of measuring what they were intended to measure. The high reliability scores were sufficient evidence that the instrument was robust to measure NGO/CBO engagement in terms of a student's political behaviours.

**Table 1: Reliability of the Instrument**

Variable Name	Total Items	Construct-wise Cronbach's Alpha Value
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	10	.936
Barriers to Political Participation	10	.817

### **Data Analysis and Results**

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were applied to assess the relationship between engagement with NGOs and CBOs and barriers to political participation, as well as to examine demographic differences such as gender, age, and type of university (Saud et al., 2020).

### **Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

The respondents were 191 university students, of whom 63.4 % were female and 36.6 % male. The majority, 86.4 % respondents (n = 165) had a BS degree, and 12% (n = 23) were pursuing M.Phil., and only 1.6 (n = 3) were PhD scholars. Regarding age, the majority of the participants, 67.5 % (n=129), were aged between 18-22 years. Students

belong to different public and private universities, including the Punjab University Lahore, Government College University Lahore, University of Education, Quaid-e-Azam University, University of Lahore, University of Faisalabad, Kinnaird College for Women University, Superior University, University of Malakand, Women University Swabi and University of Swat, but the majority of students (n = 161) from public Universities. In their economic background, the majority of the respondents stated that they were in middle-income families (48.2, n = 92). The majority of the students respond that their families were politically inactive (71.2, n = 136). Geographically, most of the students (83.8, n = 160) were from Punjab, then Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan, Balochistan, Sindh and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Lastly, 19.9 % (n = 38) of the respondents said they were currently



employed in NGOs or CBOs like Alkhidmat Foundation, Akhuwat, Echo for Equity, Sarioon

Pakistan, Allah Waly Trust, Learners Nexus and Jannat-ul-Firdos Trust.

**Table 2:** *Students' Demographic Data (N=191)*

Demographic Information	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	70	36.6
Female	121	63.4
<b>Age</b>		
18-22	129	67.5
23-27	52	27.2
28-32	3	1.6
Above 33	7	3.7
<b>Education Level</b>		
BS	165	86.4
M. Phil	23	12
PHD	3	1.6
<b>Type of University</b>		
Private	30	15.7
Public	161	84.3
<b>Family Socioeconomic Status</b>		
Lower-income (Less than 50k	28	14.7
Middle-income (50k to 1 lac)	92	48.2
Upper-income (Above 1 lac)	71	37.2
<b>Family Political Background</b>		
No involvement in politics	136	71.2
Some family members are involved in politics	49	25.7
Highly politically active family	6	3.1
<b>Province of Origin</b>		
Punjab	160	83.8
Sindh	2	1
KPK	18	9.4
Balochistan	3	1.6
GB	7	3.7
AJ&K	1	.5
<b>Involvement in any NGO or CBO?</b>		
Yes	38	19.9
No	153	80.1

### Engagement with NGOs and CBOs

Students agreed that working with NGOs and

CBOs provides a place for youth to learn and develop it provided necessary resources and

support ( $\mu = 3.59$  and  $\mu = 3.46$ ). They also perceived their participation in the organization as developing personal leadership skills ( $\mu = 3.03$ ) and that it enhanced their understanding of social issues ( $\mu = 2.99$ ). Participants slightly agreed to having peer networking opportunities through NGOs ( $\mu = 2.99$ ) and following NGO/CBO interventions on social media ( $\mu = 2.98$ ). Lower

levels of agreement were reported for direct engagement, including volunteering ( $\mu = 2.63$ ), undertaking community service ( $\mu = 2.77$ ) and attending events or workshops ( $\mu = 2.30$ ). The least agreement was observed in terms of actively getting involved in an NGO's/CBO's ( $\mu = 2.46$ ) and suggesting a low degree of actual involvement (Sarwar & Farid, 2024).

**Table 3:** *Students' Engagement with NGOs and CBOs (N = 191)*

Statements	M	SD
Actively engaged with an NGO or CBO.	2.46	1.22
Attended events, workshops, or training sessions conducted by NGOs/CBOs.	2.30	1.35
Volunteered for NGOs/CBOs.	2.63	1.31
Follow NGOs/CBOs on social media to stay informed about their initiatives.	2.98	1.25
NGOs/CBOs provide resources or support that are valuable to youth.	3.46	1.12
Participated in community service or outreach activities.	2.77	1.26
Engagement with NGOs/CBOs increased understanding of social issues.	2.99	1.25
NGOs/CBOs provide a platform for youth to learn and develop skills.	3.59	1.17
Opportunities to network with other youth through NGOs/CBOs.	2.99	1.17
Involvement with NGOs/CBOs has helped to develop personal leadership skills.	3.03	1.19

Scale: Strongly Disagree (1); Disagree= (2); Neutral = (3); Agree (4); Strongly Agree (5)

### Barriers to Political Participation

Barriers to political engagement were also an important aspect of the research. Data shows that the leading envisaged barrier was concern for safety & personal security ( $\mu = 3.54$ ), followed by

lack of time related to academic/personal duties ( $\mu = 3.49$ ) and mistrust in political institutions ( $\mu = 3.43$ ). Similarly, cultural constraints ( $\mu = 3.24$ ) and the absence of political knowledge ( $\mu = 3.21$ ) were observed as major impediments. These findings indicate that psychological fears and structural constraints largely dissuade young people from engaging to a greater extent in politics.

**Table 4:** *Barriers to Political Participation (N = 191)*

Statements I,	M	SD
Lack of time due to academic or personal commitments.	3.49	0.98
Feel unsafe or fear for my security when participating in protests or rallies.	3.54	1.04
Political participation does not impact societal change.	2.90	1.15
Financial limitations prevent me from active participation.	2.99	1.04
Lack of trust in political institutions.	3.43	1.04
Apathy in my community discourages me from political involvement.	3.16	0.97
Limited access to reliable political information/resources.	3.04	1.03
Cultural or societal expectations discourage me from participating.	3.11	1.01
The complexity of the political system makes participation difficult.	3.28	1.02
The university does not provide enough opportunities or encouragement.	3.43	0.99

**Scale:** 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

#### Gender Differences in Key Study Variables

A carried out an independent samples t-test to assess gender variations in the main study variables. Male (M = 2.93, SD = 1.01) and female (M = 2.99, SD = 0.97) participants did not have any significant differences in their responses related to the measure of Engagement with NGOs

& CBOs ( $t = -0.389$ ,  $p = .698$ ), suggesting that male and female genders were equally engaged with the NGOs and CBOs. The finding indicates that there was no significant difference in the factor of Barriers to Political Participation ( $t = 0.283$ ,  $p = .778$ ), hence male and female students face analogous barriers to political participation.

**Table 5:** *Gender Differences in Key Study Variables (Independent Samples t-Test, N = 191)*

Study Variables	Male N=70		Female N=121		T	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	2.93	1.01	2.99	.97	-.389	.698
Political Awareness & Knowledge	3.92	.92	3.60	.67	2.52	.013
Political Participation and Activism	3.11	.79	2.71	.76	3.31	.001

#### Differences by Type of University

The t-test of independent samples that compared the students of the public and private universities revealed no significant difference in terms of

engagement with the NGOs and CBOs ( $t = -0.658$ ,  $p = .511$ ). Nonetheless, a small deviation was noted in the perceived barriers to political participation ( $t = 1.79$ ,  $p = .075$ ), where the perceived barriers were a little more in private



university students ( $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = .61$ ) than in the public university ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = .63$ ).

**Table 7: Differences by Type of University (Independent Samples  $t$ -Test,  $N = 191$ )**

Study Variables	Public N=161		Private N=30		$T$	$p$
	M	SD	M	SD		
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	2.99	.99	2.86	.95	-.658	.511
Barriers to Political Participation	3.20	.63	3.42	.61	1.79	.075

### Differences by Age Group

The results of the one-way ANOVA did not reveal any significant difference in the engagement with the NGOs/CBOs based on age ( $F = 0.218$ ,  $p = .884$ ) and barriers to political participation ( $F = 0.765$ ,  $p = .515$ ). Even though the respondents aged 23-27

( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) reported higher engagement compared to those aged 18-22 years ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), and those aged 28-32 years ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) felt that they had more barriers, these changes were not significant meaning that age was not a major factor influencing civic engagement or political barriers.

**Table 8: Differences by Age Group (One-Way ANOVA,  $N = 191$ )**

Study Variables	18-22 Years N=129		23-27 Years N=52		28-32 Years N=3		Above 33 N=7		$f$	$p$
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	2.95	1.01	3.04	.92	2.63	1.01	2.91	1.09	.218	.884
Barriers to Political Participation	3.20	.67	3.27	.53	3.73	.41	3.21	.59	.765	.515

### Differences by Educational Level

Outcomes provided that there were no statistically significant differences in the engagement with NGOs and CBOs and barriers to political participation among the educational levels. There was almost no difference in the engagement levels of BS ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), MPhil ( $M = 2.90$ ,

$SD = 1.00$ ), and PhD students ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) ( $F = 0.181$ ,  $p = .835$ ). In the same manner, the perceived barriers to political participation did not differ among BS ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ), MPhil ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ), and PhD students ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ), and the difference was not statistically significant ( $F = 1.00$ ,  $p = .368$ ).

**Table 9: Differences by Educational Level (One-Way ANOVA,  $N = 191$ )**

Study Variables	BS N=165		M. Phil N=23		PhD N=3		$F$	$P$
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	2.97	.98	2.90	1.00	3.26	.92	.181	.835

Barriers to Political Participation	3.24	.65	3.15	.43	3.70	.65	1.00	.368
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### Differences by Family Income Level

Statistically, there was no difference between any of the various income level of families. Participation in NGOs/CBOs increased from low-income individuals ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ) to middle-income individuals ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) to upper-income individuals ( $M = 3.07$ ,  $SD =$

1.07); however, the differences were not significant ( $F = 0.870$ ,  $p = .421$ ). Finally, and importantly, obstacles to engage politically were slightly lower among lower income students ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ) than among high income students ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ), but this difference is not significant ( $F = 1.26$ ,  $p = .285$ ).

**Table 10:** Differences by Family Income Level (One-Way ANOVA,  $N = 191$ )

Study Variables	Lower-income N=28		Middle-income N=92		Upper-income N=71		f	p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	2.80	.82	2.94	.96	3.07	1.07	.870	.421
Barriers to Political Participation	3.34	.53	3.27	.65	3.14	.63	1.26	.285

### Relationship between the main study variables

The Pearson correlation found that the relation between NGOs/CBOs engagement and barriers to

political participation is poor and not significant ( $r = .126$ ,  $p > .05$ ), and it does not suggest that the existence of barriers to political participation goes hand in hand with the level of engagement.

**Table 11:** Pearson Correlation Matrix of Key Constructs ( $N = 191$ )

Key Construct	1	2
Engagement with NGOs & CBOs	1	
Barriers to Political Participation	.126	.1

### Impact of NGOs/CBOs on barriers of political participation

The regression analysis examined the impact of engagement with NGOs and CBOs on barriers to political participation. The results revealed a positive but statistically insignificant relationship ( $\beta = 0.126$ ,  $t = 1.747$ ,  $p = .082$ ). This indicates that while higher engagement with NGOs and CBOs

was slightly associated with reduced barriers, the effect was not strong enough to be considered significant (

Sarwar & Farid, 2025). Hence, NGO and CBO involvement did not meaningfully influence the students' perceived barriers to political participation in this sample.

**Table 12:** Impact of NGOs/CBOs on barriers of political participation ( $N = 191$ )

Study Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	p
	Beta	Std. Error	Beta		
Barriers to political participation	.196	.112	.126	1.747	.082

## Findings and Discussion

The research sought to identify the purported obstacles to youth political engagement in Pakistan and determine the contribution that NGOs and CBOs could play in curbing the obstacles. It also investigated the difference in engagement with NGOs/CBOs based on demographic variables like gender, education, and level of income. The findings are critically discussed below in terms of the study objectives, hypothesis, and literature.

### Objective 1. Barriers to Political Participation

The results have shown that the most significant barriers were the safety considerations, insufficient time because of academic demands, and distrust towards political institutions. These results are in line with the conclusions of Verba et al. (1995), Norris (2002), and Dalton (2008), who found limited time, low efficacy and political alienation to be frequent discouraging factors to youth participation. Likewise, Zaidi (2022) and Cammaerts et al., (2016) emphasized that the politicization of the youth in Pakistan and other transitional democracies is suppressed by the institution, lack of civic participation, and fear of being marginalized (Shafique, 2024). The findings of this research, however, build on these findings by highlighting that it is the psychological phobia and institutional suspicion, as opposed to apathy, that form the main limitation of the Pakistani, youth though some studies attribute disengagement primarily to political apathy rather than structural barriers (Yasir et al., 2023). This result is contrary to the previous assumptions that the absence of engagement is due to the lack of interest or knowledge (Galston, 2021; Zheng et al., 2016). Instead, it shows that the political participation of the youth is limited by contextual and institutional factors that do not allow the freedom of expression and not by their lack of interest in participating.

### Objective 2. Relationship between Engagement with NGOs/CBOs and Barriers to Political Participation

The correlation analysis demonstrated a weak and statistically insignificant relationship ( $r = .126$ ,  $p > .05$ ) between NGO/CBO engagement and barriers and therefore, they did not prove Hypothesis 1. This finding implies that although

students can be encouraged to engage in civic activities via NGO and CBOs, the effectiveness of these activities does not always lead to the elimination of the obstacles to political participation.

These findings are inconsistent with the results of Putnam (2000), Bessant (2004), and Benn et al. (2014), who highlighted that political trust and efficacy are promoted by civic participation via voluntary organizations. Another conclusion made by Ahmed et al. (2021) was that participation in NGOs by students had a positive effect on political awareness and activism. However, similar challenges have been identified in other developing contexts, where institutional, legal, and structural barriers have continued to limit youth political inclusion despite the expansion of civil society spaces (Bani-Hani & Alhathloul, 2022; Onyewuchi, et al., 2024). Contrarily, the present work suggests that although NGOs and CBOs do have a contribution in civic learning, they do not significantly influence the institutional or psychological barriers keeping the youth away from political participation. This could indicate the narrow political focus of NGOs and CBOs in Pakistan, as most of the organizations are more focused on social welfare and developmental efforts than politics and reform.

### Objective 3. Impact of NGO/CBO Engagement on Barriers to Political Participation

The regression analysis showed that the effect value ( $b = 0.126$ ,  $t = 1.747$ ,  $p = .082$ ) was positive but not statistically significant, and thus Hypothesis 2 was rejected. Though the perceived barriers were slightly related to the increased interaction with NGOs and CBOs, the effect was not significant to have a significant relationship.

This result is inconsistent with the works by Kahne et al. (2015) and Terrierez and Lin (2020), who have shown that civic organizations are a possible way to empower youth and reduce political alienation. Nevertheless, it coincides with the information presented by Dalton, (2008) and Zaidi, (2022) and D'Agostino & Visser (2014) that in many cases, the impact of organizational participation is insignificant because of institutional obstacles, e.g., the lack of a civic space and political trust. Similarly, studies by Bani-Hani and Alhathloul (2022) report that even active youth programs in developing democracies

face systemic limits to political inclusion. Consequently, as much as NGOs and CBOs in Pakistan play a role in civic exposure and building leadership, they are limited to breaking a systemic barrier such as institutional apathy, fear of repression and limited campus-based political mobilization.

#### **4. Demographic Differences in Engagement and Barriers**

Findings show that the male and female students were subject to the same restrictions. This observation is contrary to the results of Burns et al. (2009) and Inglehart and Norris (2003), who found that there were still gender disparities in political participation. However, it is in line with Coffe and Bolzendahl (2010), Find out civic and community-based organizations provide rather fair opportunities that both men and women can enjoy and that these groups are quite inclusive in terms of participation.

There was no significant difference in terms of education level and institutional membership, which was contrary to what Dalton (2008) had provided, since he related higher education to higher political participation. This can be because of the homogeneity of the sample-university students who had been exposed to the same civic experiences and school setups. This study indicates that diversity in curricula and campus life at both the public and the privately-owned institutions could be the reason why there is homogeneity in political participation, even though the previous study established that diversity in academic exposure enhances civic engagement (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Similarly, Quintelier (2007) also did not find significant age-dependent differences in youths' political engagement, which actually concur with the non-significant differences in age as experienced in this case. There were also no differences between income levels, which is consistent with Brady et al. (1995), who stated that economic resources could readily engage people, but they were incapable of breaking deeply rooted institutionalized obstacles. Slightly, students with political families mentioned a higher level of engagement, as Jennings et al. (2009) indicated that family socialization was a significant influencer of political behavior. Nevertheless,

these effects did not rise to significant levels, implying that both structural and institutional mistrust undermine the role of familial or individual background in the Pakistani political environment.

#### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The article has several limitations. First, it is cross-sectional, meaning that it could not be used to determine a causal relationship between NGO/CBO engagement and barriers to political participation (Sherrod et al., 2002). Second, it targets university students, which limits its applicability to the entire youth of the nation (Kiesa et al., 2007). Third, bias might be caused by the use of self-reported data (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Moreover, the study was carried out in the particular sociopolitical environment in Pakistan, and it might not reveal the patterns of youth engagement in other countries (Bano, 2012; Lieven, 2011). In addition, the research also failed to investigate internal NGO/CBO attributes which could affect the order of the student (Putnam, 2000).

The future research ought to be based on longitudinal and mixed research methods; more youth samples should be incorporated (Norris, 2011; Inglehart & Norris, 2003).

#### **Conclusion**

Although NGOs and CBOs provide a platform for civic education and learning, they have limited capacities to minimize structural and psychological impediments. Since demographic factors did not have a major impact on engagement or barriers, which indicates that civic limitations have an impact on the youth as a whole, irrespective of their gender, age, or socioeconomic status.

The gendered, as well as the demographic trends disclosed here, add to a bigger insight into the youth political engagement in transitional democracies. The absence of a gender gap in the engagement implies that the civil society organizations offer a more convenient space than the formal political institutions. However, this does not happen since institutional distrust and insecurity remain the major factors that remind us that the fundamental barriers are not personal but

institutional. NGOs and CBOs play an effective role in facilitating political awareness and learning about civic life, but they can hardly change the structural or institutional reality. This makes them a critical part of political education, and not an agent of institutional change. Thus, successful

youth representation in politics needs to be systemic, institutional cooperation, and the creation of more civic space so NGOs, universities, and policymakers can cooperate to make the barriers that keep youth alienated from politics in Pakistan less dominant.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

### **Funding**

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

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