

Reasons for Political Interest and Apathy among University Students: A Qualitative Study

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The research focused on exploring the various reasons for political interest and apathy among university students in order to understand why some youngsters are interested whereas others are apathetic towards our political system. Purposive sampling strategy was used to select the sample. The sample ($N = 16$) including men ($n = 12$) and women ($n = 4$) consisted of students from various departments of Government College University, Lahore. Age range of the sample was from 18 to 26 years. Focus group technique was used to collect data (indicators and responses). Grounded theory was applied for the purpose of analysis and themes were identified. Results indicated various reasons for political interest and apathy and their ramifications. The analysis revealed that although all participants unanimously agreed that there are flaws in the political system but participants who were interested in politics held an optimistic point of view regarding the situation and believed that through their involvement in politics they can bring about a change. People who were apathetic mostly had a pessimistic point of view and as a result had developed the feelings of learned helplessness and believed that no matter what they do all their efforts will be fruitless. This research serves as a resource for those who have an interest in increasing knowledge in the subject of politics and for those who are attracted to the idea of politics but are repelled by the partisanship and sophistries represented by most of the political establishments without realizing that their alienation would further worsen the situation.

Keywords: political interest, apathy, students, grounded theory

When we hear the word politics the images that come to mind are of government, politicians, and political parties or so to say the idea of corruption and dirty tricks. These images have obscured the true meaning of the word politics which originated from a Greek word "polis", meaning the state or community as a whole. The idea of "Polis" emerged from the writings of Plato and Aristotle and referred to the development of an ideal state. According to them, politics referred to the use of various techniques and strategies to create a better society than the one already exist (Aristotle, 1996).

Politics is the process whereby groups of individuals make collective decisions. Politics is observed in all human group interactions including corporate, academic, and religious institutions. Politics help create laws that serve to protect human rights, such as freedom of thought, expression and action, justice for all and aims to achieve economic prosperity to create better living for all citizens and protects them against any threats to their lives and possessions (Aristotle, 1996).

Politics exists due to the broad spectrum of ideas and opinions within any society. Politics is thus used as a peacemaking strategy to provide solutions to conflict arising among groups and to facilitate the decision making process by involving all concerned parties. However, the most probable outcome might be a win-lose situation where one party will have to give in in order to reach a consensus. The mechanism however, may differ depending on the options that the parties are provided with. One such mechanism is

the use of votes to express one's opinion because the final decision depends on the amount of power that one group possesses and that comes from having a vast majority at their side. Power is enhanced by bringing more and more people over to one's side. Thus, by appealing to members of a society with solutions to their problems and promises to act in their interests, a group or individual can gain support and ultimately authority over other groups and individuals whether this be in an honest or dishonest way (Aristotle, 1996).

Regardless of the above mentioned fact, one inescapable reality of today's world is that a lot of people do not have the tendency to develop comprehensive political ideas. They consider political discussions and political ideas seemingly boring and avoid them no matter how great their practical implications are. However, such tendency is quiet normal as not all of us can develop interest in natural science or philosophical ideas even if we are convinced of their value to the human society. Thus, because of lack of political opinion and lack of public participation in the political process those in power engage in pursuing their own goals. As a result the masses become more and more alienated or to say apathetic towards politicians and the political process in general.

Apathy is basically a state of indifference where an individual has an absence of interest or concern to certain aspects of emotional, social or physical life. Apathy can be object-specific towards a person, activity or environment. It is a common reaction to stress where it manifests as "learned helplessness" and is commonly associated with depression. It can also reflect a non-pathological lack of interest in things one does not consider important (Solmitz, 2000).

Apathy related to politics and political situation is generally referred to as political apathy which is affecting young and old alike resulting in lower and lower turn out at polling stations during elections. This could result in political misrepresentation both at national as well as at the local level allowing political parties to

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gain access to the government through the back door. Apathy is another term for passivity, submissiveness, and even numbness reaching epidemic proportions when it comes to social, economic, environmental, and political issues. Symptoms include lack of awareness, concern, social responsibility and action which includes voting. This is particularly apparent for those in the age group 18 to 24 years (Dan, 2002).

Political apathy is an inevitable end result from the transition of politics from an art form that is dominated by those who engage in politics for the love of politics and a genuine desire to improve conditions to cooler, colder, more calculating "career" politicians, who see it as a job like in any other company where the goal is to keep the current party or company in power without the regard to what happens in the country as a whole. So, the public especially younger people in general are no longer interested in politics (Dan, 2002).

Political apathy among young people is not a new concept; various political surveys carried out all over the world portray similar tendencies among young people. Most recent surveys believe that this aversion of young people from the entire electoral process is the result of a wide range drift away from traditional politics and is not just something temporary. As a survey conducted by Bristow (2000) on political interest and engagement reveals that young people between the ages of 18 and 24 are much less likely to vote as compared to any other age groups and also that during the elections of 1997, 40% of the young population between 18-24 years of age was not even registered to vote and of those registered only 59% voted, which is the lowest turnout ever recorded in the last 30 years. When asking about voting in general nearly 13% of 18-24 years old claimed that "it is not worth voting" and 50% of them claimed that "people should only vote if they care who wins". By contrast, only 36 % of 18-24 year olds claimed that "everyone has a duty to vote".

Furthermore, a survey conducted by Centre of Civic Education (n. d.), a non-governmental organization in major areas of Pakistan revealed that almost 70% of the Pakistani youth are indifferent to our political process. The feeling of non-engagement towards politics was highest in North West Frontier Province which was almost 80%. This was followed by Islamabad, Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan. The survey confirmed apolitical posture of nearly 50% uneducated youth. Problems in political structures, persistent instability of the democratic system, and disenchantment with the history of politicians and disrespect of the youth's ideas were some of the major reasons for apathy among the young population. Another research done by Center for Civic Education Pakistan (n. d.) revealed that a vast majority of Pakistani youth nearly 82% do not engage in politics or political activities. Their research further revealed that Pakistani youth is by-and-large deterred from politics due to restrictive government policies. Moreover the percentage of apathy towards politics was consistent between men (70%) and women (70.8%). Another study reported that most people consider politics a useless activity or a thankless job (Hussain, 2007).

What is really being said here is that participation in politics is no longer part of the fabric of everyday life, something that the public did without questioning its importance. Now it is a lifestyle choice; a decision that carries barely more weight in young people than the clothes they wear and the music they listen to. Interest in politics is just as individual and subjective as interests in sports, music or art. Young people are currently taking action in a range of political activities even if they do not see them as political. In addition, while they often do not assess themselves as being interested in

politics, they are concerned about issues such as education and qualifications, job availability and security, and discrimination which are at the core of the government's agenda (Solmitz, 2000).

White, Bruce, and Ritchie (2000) identified the underlying reasons that might trigger young people's interest in the political process and revealed that interest was triggered as a result of one of the following reasons: changing personal and financial circumstances, being exposed to discussions or information about politics, and the opportunity to get involved in politics typically on reaching the age of electoral eligibility. Before midterm elections in USA results showed that almost 32 % of young adults planned to vote and 70 % of them believed that politics played an important role in their everyday lives. Apart from voting, young people were also more creative than older adults in devising new ways for political engagement such as internet communities and blogs etc. They were very active in online political activities such as online petitioning and debating about various political issues.

Similarly, nearly 84% of the Pakistani youth (18-29 years) have found to believe that politics can be used to bring about a positive change in the society. Furthermore, almost 80% of them are willing to play their part in politics (Hussain, 2007).

All these researches suggest that awareness in all areas is the key to political participation and it is this aspect that must be stressed early in life for a positive change. It is essential to sensitize people including older children, youth and adults to issues ranging from economic woes to antiquated societal values (that cause society to regress) and to make them aware of their rights as citizens.

This research aims at exploring the reasons for political interest and apathy among Pakistani youth as most of the researches done earlier on politics and political process in Pakistan have only focused on exploring the percentage of individuals who are interested or indifferent toward politics, with little emphasis on the reason for such behavior. There is dearth of indigenous research exploring these issues which play a vital role in the progress of any society. Moreover, the limited researches done in this area have focused mainly on quantitative research techniques, whereas this research takes a more qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem under investigation.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling strategy was used in which participants were included in the sample based on their availability. The sample ($N = 16$) consisted of students including men ($n = 12$) and women ($n = 4$) from various departments of Government College University, Lahore. Age range of the sample was from 18 to 26 years. The academic level ranged from bachelors to masters and they were the residents of Lahore belonging to middle-socioeconomic status. Among the sixteen participants; four were from Political Science Department, three from Economics, three from Business Administration, three from Psychology and three from Natural Sciences group.

Procedure

Participants were contacted personally and were explained the purpose of the research. Two focus groups were conducted and the participants were randomly divided into two groups; group A and

group B. The focus group with group A took place in the morning whereas the focus group with group B took place in the afternoon. Focus group was conducted in the library of the Psychology Department, Government College University, Lahore where prior arrangements were made for conducting the focus groups. The seating was arranged in a circular order so that all participants could face each other. Informed consent was taken prior to conducting the focus groups. Two moderators and one observer, to prompt the moderators about the missed focal points or strayed discussion conducted the focus groups. The groups were first asked to introduce themselves to each other followed by a discussion of focal points regarding their attitude towards politics. Both focus groups discussions were audio taped and were transcribed and coded for the purpose of analysis.

Analysis

Data was analyzed using Grounded Theory Approach. Grounded theory conceptualizes 'what is going on' by using empirical data. This technique involves in-depth exploration of the issue under investigation in order to develop theoretical framework which is grounded in the data. Therefore, grounded theory was appropriate to use in this research as the aim of the study was to explore the various reasons for political interest and apathy and to develop models based on empirical data.

Results

After the completion of the focus group discussion, the whole data was transcribed and coded, for which selective coding technique was used and the similar codes were then sorted into categories in order to develop a logical framework for the analysis of the data. These categories were then analyzed to obtain the reasons of political interest and apathy among students. The categorization of data and results are presented in the form of figures.

Figure 1 shows the various categories depicting reasons for political interest among university students. Such as politics serve as a platform for the development of nation and improvement of political system, it can be used to bring about change such as free judiciary and honest and representative leadership and it is present in every walk of life. Another reason of interest was participants' belief that all major changes in history have occurred as a result of political revolution. They believed that politics is in their roots, they have inherited it from their forefathers.

Figure 2 shows circular relationship between political interest and change. The data reveals that political change can indirectly create interest in politics by affecting common man and such interest can lead to political change through common man's involvement in the political process by voting.

Figure 3 shows the various categories depicting reasons for political apathy among university students such as lack of true leadership, corrupt leaders, corrupt electoral system, corrupt bureaucracy, presence of feudalism, lack of awareness regarding politics, ignoring public demands, pre-poll raving, and learned helplessness.

Figure 4 shows circular relationship between leadership crisis and political apathy. As the data reveals that leadership crisis leads to political apathy and in turn such apathy indirectly leads to the development of leadership crisis because very few people turn out

to cast votes, allowing false votes to be cast thus benefiting the corrupt system.

Figure 5 shows how political apathy facilitates the people in power in violating human rights and ignoring public demands, because no one comes out to protest against such corruption and injustice, which in turn further increases political apathy.

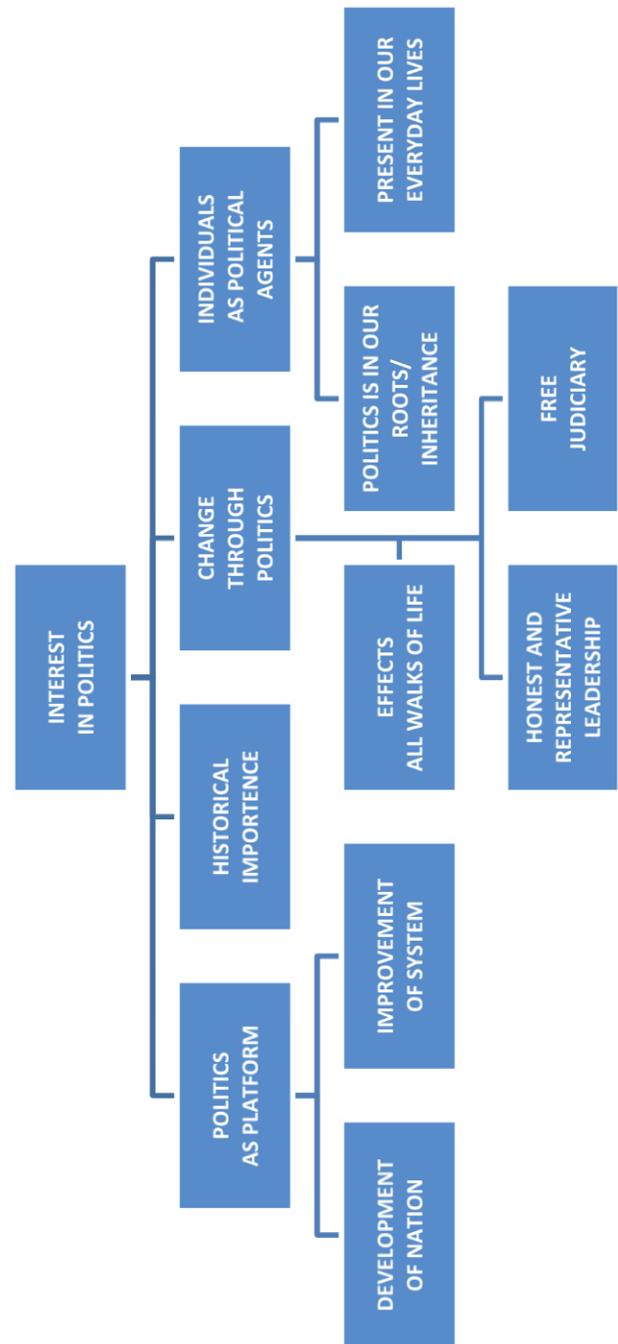


Figure 1. Reasons for political interest among university students

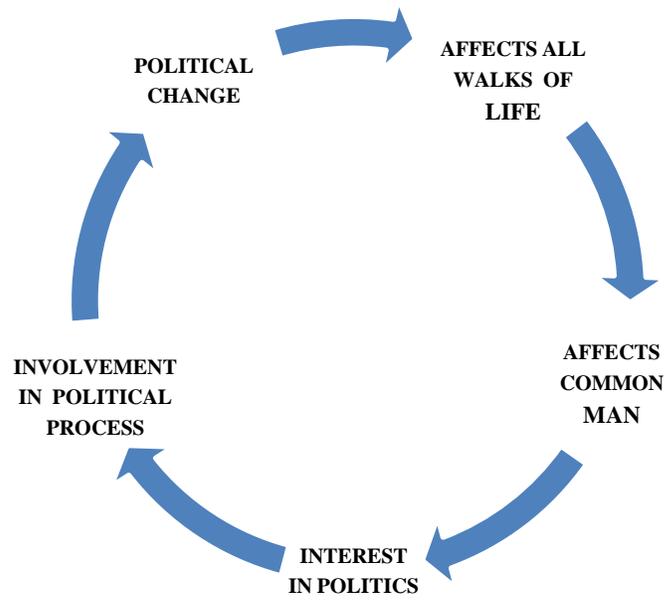


Figure 2. Circular relationship between interest in politics and political change

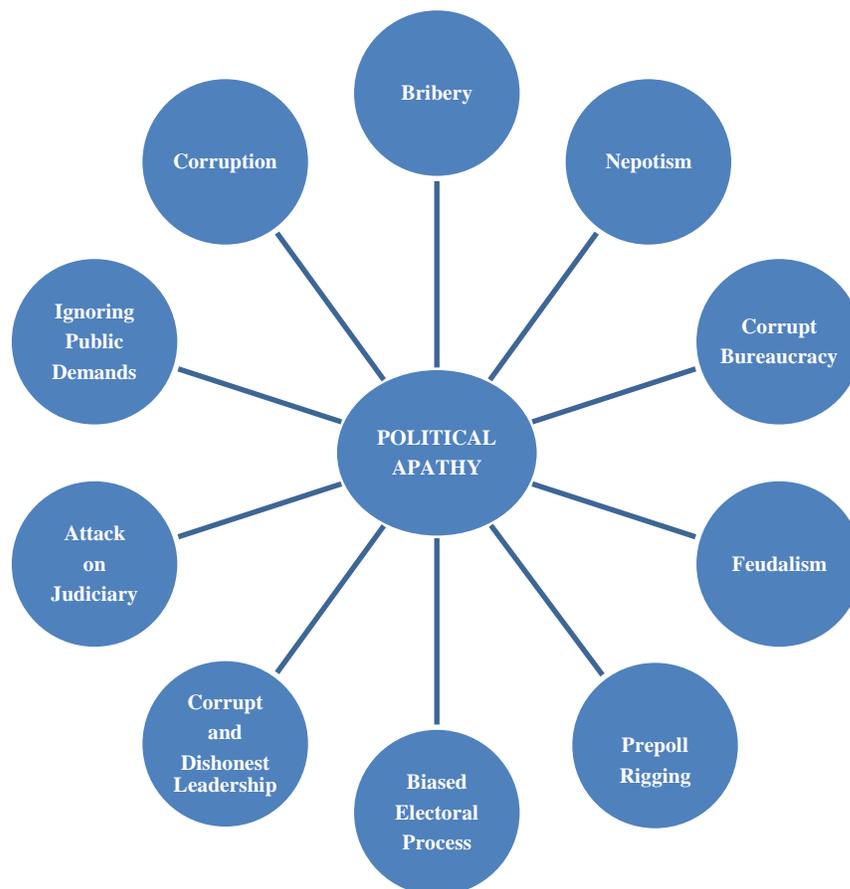


Figure 3. Reasons for political apathy among university students

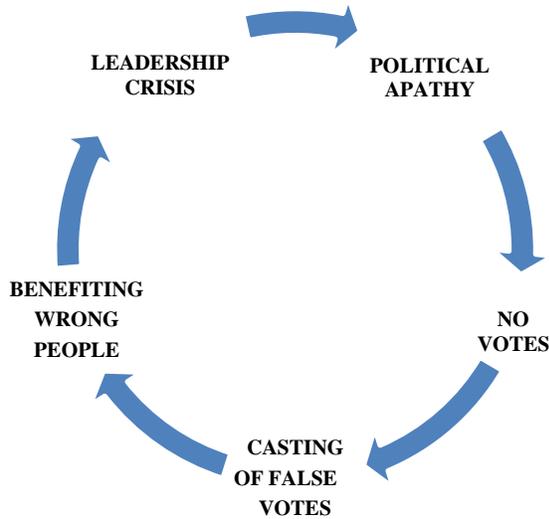


Figure 4. Circular relationship between leadership crisis and political apathy

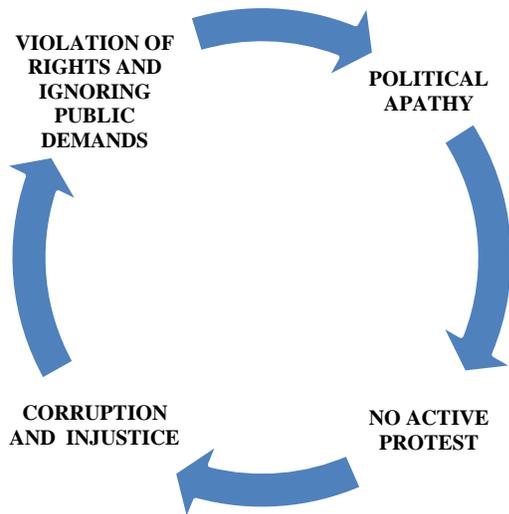


Figure 5. Political apathy facilitating the people in power in violating human rights and ignoring public demands

Discussion

Analysis of the data obtained from conducting focus group resulted in providing various reasons for political interest and apathy. These reasons were then grouped into categories so as to provide a logical framework which combines the data and draws some meaning into it.

The reasons of interest were not just due to personal or familial orientation or due to national interest, but as it appears from the data that the main reason turned out to be was that politics provides

a platform for the development of nation, enables us to fight for our freedom and, rights and also provides us a way to bring about a change in the country. A participant stated,

“Since Pakistan itself came into being as a result of political struggle it is the only mean for achieving our goals. It shows us a way to gain prosperity by improving all the systems such as economic system, police, judiciary, bureaucracy, law and order, education, and thus lead the nation towards the path of development.”

Political change (such as new policies and laws) affects almost everyone in all walks of life (economic, financial, educational etc) and thus results in developing our interest in the political process. These results are in line with the research done by White et al. (2000), who concluded that changing personal and financial circumstances sometimes triggers an interest in politics and that interest can lead to involvement in the political process thus enabling people to bring changes in their environment and to remove the flaws in the present system. A participant stated,

“Since corruption, bribery, nepotism and violation of the rights of the public are due to the strong hold of feudalism in the country’s politics, and it is through involvement in the political process that we can bring about a change in this system”.

Moreover, participants believed that through involvement in politics people can elect honest and representative leadership that will lead people to a path of continued development. It was stated, *“By taking interest in politics and participating in the electoral process through our votes we can select the right leadership that will work for the betterment of the country and will protect the rights of the people and provide quick justice to all by giving judiciary its rightful freedom”.*

Furthermore, students who were interested in politics were of the view that politics hold great importance in their lives because it is in their very roots, they have inherited it from their forefathers and it is present in their homes, institutions, workplace and in their very lives. Politics has existed in the world from the very beginning and it is only through political struggle that revolutions came in the world. A participant stated,

“Many people, such as Nelson Mandela and Mao Tse Tung, had to face many hardships in order to bring about a change, they had to go to prison and suffer a lot still they did not quit. Same is the case with Russian and French revolution and they all struggled using the platform of politics”.

So, it is through politics that people can revolutionize political system thus bringing peace and prosperity within their country and making it a better place to live in.

However, there are many opposing views as well since many participants believed that the political system of this country is leading to deterioration rather than the development of the nation. The flaws in the system are leading to more corruption benefiting only the rich ignoring the common people. Deficits of leadership exists in the country. No leader is assumed to be capable enough to lead towards development of the nation or to be able to bring about a change. These results are in line with the research done by Hussain (2007). A participant stated,

“Leaders themselves are corrupt, they are more or less the same and work for their own vested interests rather than the interest of the nation and ignore the demands of the public. The bureaucratic and feudal domination in the country’s political system leads to the violation of the rights of the public as well as of media and judiciary”.

The analysis further revealed that people were also apathetic because they thought that the political system is not affecting them directly and their personal life remains unchanged regardless of whether democracy or dictatorship exist in the country. As a result, they have become indifferent to the whole political process. A participant stated,

"I am not interested in politics since it doesn't affect my personal life".

Women were also apathetic because they were of the view that in our political system no one can talk about the rights of women. No benefits are provided to them and government takes no interest in their issues. A participant stated,

"No one listens to them (women) even in the parliament no one talks about their rights so why being a woman I be interested in politics".

Another interesting reason for apathy turned out to be that taking interest in politics does not bear any positive results for the masses providing no benefits to them. It was stated that,

"The politicians promise to improve the condition of our roads and schools but once elected, they forget all their promises so why should we give votes to them".

Since human beings are mostly selfish and work mostly to benefit themselves so why take part in politics if it doesn't offer them incentives or affect them directly.

The results further revealed that apathy in people regarding the political process leads to further apathy. It also facilitates the feeling of learned helplessness in individuals. The reason being that because of our apathy towards the system we are most likely to focus on the negative outcomes portrayed by the media rather than looking at some of the positive outcomes. As a result, people start to believe that all politicians are the same and they are not going to change anything, rather they will encourage the corruption within the system for their own benefit and so their efforts will bear no fruits and because of the pre-poll rigging casting a vote will make no difference. So, they stop making any efforts to change the scenario and just wait for a miracle to happen and when this does not happen their apathy further increases and they become more and more alienated from the whole political process. A participant stated,

"Because of your apathy false votes are being cast and corrupt and undeserving get selected leading to more corruption etc, and all this happens because of your apathy that you are just sitting idly and are not making any efforts for it".

Thus, the analysis indicates that the participants in focus groups which included the clusters of students who were apathetic and those who were interested unanimously agreed that there are flaws in the system. But the people who were interested held an optimistic point of view regarding the situation and believed that through their involvement in politics they can bring about a change in the country which will lead to the development of the nation and will bring peace and prosperity in the country. Whereas the people who were apathetic mostly held a pessimistic point of view and had developed the feelings of learned helplessness and thought all their efforts will go useless and as a result they had given up all efforts and hopes.

This research has led to the development of the following hypothesis:

1. Youngsters who are interested in politics will be more likely to vote as compared to those who are not interested in politics.
2. Youngsters who are interested in politics will be more likely to associate themselves with a political party as compared to those

who are not interested.

3. Youngsters who are apathetic towards politics will be less likely to attend political rallies as compared to those who are interested in politics.

Conclusion

The results indicate that young people cannot be treated as a uniform group as far as the topic of politics is concerned, as they vary greatly in their level of interest in politics. Some believe that politics in general and politicians specifically are not concerned about them and are hopeless about our political system and current leaders. However, some young people still have a ray of hope and feel strengthened that they do possess the ability to change the system by using the platform of politics and are not yet ready to withdraw their efforts.

Implications

This research has great implications for those who have an interest in increasing knowledge in the subject of politics and for those who are attracted to the idea of politics but are repelled by the partisanship and sophistries represented by most of the political establishments without realizing that their alienation would further worsen the situation. This research confirms and contributes to existing evidence about the reasons of interest or lack of interest in politics. By focusing on the factors that are leading young people away from politics one can greatly increase the participation of young people in the political system thus bringing about a change. Moreover, if Pakistan's political parties could tap the younger generation's fresh ideas, youthful energy, and enthusiasm than they would benefit greatly.

Through this research youngsters specifically and individuals generally will also come to realize that shying away from the topic of politics does no one any good. On the contrary, it is their apathy towards the politics that is leading to the downfall of this system, ultimately affecting everyone's lives.

Limitations and Suggestions

This research aimed at exploring the reasons for interest and lack of interest in politics. On a broader level, our investigation affords critical insights for the theory and practice of political research. However, this research has only scratched the surface and additional research is necessary to further refine the framework.

As our research represents preliminary insight into the issue, certain limitations are inherent. Such as that the sample was only limited to the students of Government College University, Lahore with students mostly residing in Lahore belonging to middle socio-economic status. Future research must be undertaken incorporating a more diverse sample including students belonging to all economic stratas, age groups, educational background with equal representation of both gender. Moreover, further research should be expanded to include individuals from all major areas of Pakistan.

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