

HOW DO UNIVERSITY TEACHERS PERCEIVE THEIR STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN PARTY POLITICS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY FROM A POLITICALLY TURBULENT REGION

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ABSTRACT

Universities through-out Pakistan have at least one student wing belonging to one of the mainstream political parties of the country. The political parties, irrespective of their political orientation i.e. secular, religious or nationalist, attempt to establish their roots in the universities through the mentioned political wing. This involvement of students is perceived by different opinion leaders of the society in different ways. Bearing in mind the geo-political situation of the study area, the university teachers are considered to be the most influential opinion leaders. Therefore, considering importance of university teachers' perception regarding deep rooted political involvement of the parties in universities and use of its students for their political objectives; this study attempts to analyze the teachers' perception regarding students' involvement in the party politics at university level. To carry out this study, we use census data comprising 110 university teachers. We employ *Chi Square test* analysis. The analysis shows a strong perceived association between political activities and academic performance of students. Moreover, political participation by the students is perceived to be a total waste of their time; it diverts students' attention from their studies; and results in a tug of war among the university students.

Key words: Students, KUST, Party politics, Teachers' perception

INTRODUCTION

Involvement of students in political activities has a long history in Pakistani educational institutions. In different educational institutions in general and in universities in particular, students are directly or indirectly involved in various types of political activities. It is also observed that a significant proportion of students are found deeply involved in party politics. To increase and/or improve their street power most of the parties these days try to allure students by one way or other to join their party. All the parties of Pakistan, Regardless of their political affiliation, consider their student wings as a back bone of their street power. Therefore, involvement of students in party politics have both positive and negative out-comes. If on one hand, students' involvement in the

politics contributes towards their political awareness, achievement of their basic human rights, and their leadership skills (Gibson, 2001; Long, 2004). On the other hand, it has certain disadvantages like loss of time, concentration and even lives of students as a result of increased absenteeism, and involvement in violent clashes with antagonist student groups and university authorities (Rimmerman, 2005; Gibson, 2001; Long, 2004; Near, 2003).

This student involvement has shaped up various schools of thoughts. The most popular among these are presented by Rimmerman (2005), which advocated an orthodox approach of the issue. It considers that involvement of students in politics, corrupts their minds and results in their moral degradation. Hence, the political involvement

diverts the student's attention from their core goal that is their moral development and intellectual uplift. On the other hand, according to Near (2003) – known as a revolutionary school of thought – politics is a priceless gift of contemporary human knowledge. Furthermore, Near argues that discouraging students from involving in politics may hurt their spirit of democracy. However, Patterson (2002) adopts a moderate approach on the political involvement of students that is why it is regarded as a moderate school of thought. Patterson believes that students may be facilitated to study the political history of the world in general and that of their country in particular. Prohibiting involvement of students in politics may adversely affect their future political participation. They should be educated on the current political trends. However, their involvement in party politics should be discouraged. They should be imparted with political wisdom in their schools and colleges through open debates, dialogues, discussion seminars and/or lectures.

MacKinnon (1965); Glendon (1919); Cone and David (2001), while supporting an orthodox school of thought, argue that on campus party politics may be harmful for intellectual progress of a region. Students can easily be exploited by politicians for their personal ends. Baldrige and Riley (1977) stated that these affiliations of students with political parties promote compartmentalization of the universities and can adversely affect autonomy of the same as it calls for ever increasing political influence and direct involvement of politicians in the affairs of universities. Besides, the orthodox school of thought was further explained by Cohen et al. (1974) and Kapungu (2008) who mentioned that the politicians formulate educational policies according to their own wishes and whims, i.e., an attempt to influence the entire system in their own favor.

The politicians not only want to influence the students directly but also through influencing their opinion leaders, i.e. their teachers. The attempts by politicians to misuse the role of teachers as opinion leaders have been explained by MacKinnon (1965). According to MacKinnon, the politicians try their level best to misuse the mentioned role of educationist by influencing the academia to shape up opinion of their young pupils, influence their minds and manipulate their actions so that it can increase the power of the politicians. Moreover, the same has been explained by Mouffe (1993); Pickles (1964) and Lukes (1974) in this way, political parties mobilize student groups for protest or lobby for political change.

A large segment of the existing literature focuses on an orthodox school of thoughts and place too much emphasis on students' involvement in academic activities while strongly discourages students' involvement in the party politics. The existing literature seriously lacks a balanced approach on the issue. This paper attempts to complement the existing literature by adopting a balanced approach on the issue. To achieve this objective, we select teachers of a University as our subject and indirectly deduce the consequences of involvement of the University students in party politics. The reason for adopting the indirect approach on the issue is according to the socio-psychological condition of the students in Indian-subcontinent, where academia/teachers are regarded as mentor/opinion leaders. From the opinion of academia, we can even predict the future generations' involvement in different spheres of life including politics. For example, whether students are more inclined towards studies or co-curricular activities or even politics can easily be deduced by the current perception of their opinion leaders. Most importantly that data pertains to a relatively new educational institution with very important geopolitical location.

OBJECTIVES

The study attempts to explore how involvement of students in politics is perceived by their opinion leaders i.e. their teachers and infer political involvement of the students which is a mirror image of the opinion of their leaders.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this section, we give importance of study area and describe our data sample.

Study area

The study area is important bearing in mind its uniqueness in terms of its geo-political location. The study area is located at the juncture of various tribal agencies of FATA and PATA. The area is known for its peculiar political structure, where only tribal elders and elite are allowed to take part in mainstream politics. Moreover, the existing political structure discourages the involvement of the youth in politics, in general and that in party politics, in particular. The survey area i.e., Kohat University of Science & Technology (KUS), Kohat has significantly large proportion of students belonging to the tribal areas. The study can be useful to open new debate regarding political participation and or academic involvement of youth from the area as it is viewed by their opinion leaders. In long-run, the study is expected to shape-up new political or academic scene of the area.

Data

We use census data for analysis in this paper. The data comprises 110 respondents

belonging to academic staff of the KUST. The data is collected through a detailed structured survey questionnaire devised after several rounds of meetings of authors. The internal consistency of the questionnaire has been checked by Cronbach's alpha, with a value of 0.67, which is acceptable for research (Haller & Klein, 2001; Witte & Witte, 2004; and Khan, 2012).

Association of Variables

We attempt to answer the following associations;

- To find association between teachers' perception (as a dependent variable) and students' involvement in party politics (as an independent variable)
- To investigate whether perception of the teacher is influenced by their gender, residential location, and marital status.

To find the above mentioned associations, we use Chi-square test of independence. It's worth mentioning here that through the above mentioned analyses, we are not establishing causality. Our attention is to show correlation between the factors under considerations. In other words, this study is intended to undertake descriptive analysis only.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section we discuss our results. We present our major results in Table No. 1. To show association between various factors that can potentially affect the students' participation, we also display results of Chi Square test in the right most column of the table.

Table 1: Relationship between students' involvement in party politics and teachers' perception

Statements	Response	Teachers' perception		Total	Statistics
		Positive	Negative		
Student should pursue their study only	Yes	9(17.3)	56(50.9)	75(68.2)	$\chi^2 = 5.006(.082)$
	No	14(12.7)	20(18.2)	34(30.9)	
	Don't know	1(.9)	0(.0)	1(.9)	

Involvement in political activities adversely affects the academic performance of students	Yes	25(73.5)	69(90.8)	94(85.5)	$\chi^2 = 6.538(.038)$
	No	8(7.3)	5(4.5)	13(11.8)	
	Don't know	1(.9)	2(1.8)	3(2.7)	
Involvement in political activities results in huge waste of time	Yes	19(17.3)	64(58.2)	83(75.5)	$\chi^2 = 16.965(.000)$
	No	15(13.6)	8(7.3)	23(20.9)	
	Don't know	0(.0)	4(3.6)	4(3.6)	
Political involvement of student divert their attention from their studies	Yes	22(20.0)	69(62.7)	91(82.7)	$\chi^2 = 13.156(.001)$
	No	12(10.9)	6(5.5)	18(16.4)	
	Don't know	0(.0)	1(.9)	1(.9)	
Political parties promote their agenda in educational institutions	Yes	23(20.9)	61(55.5)	84(76.4)	$\chi^2 = 3.692(.158)$
	No	10(9.5)	15(13.6)	25(22.7)	
	Don't know	1(.9)	0(.0)	1(.9)	
Those students participating in politics whom families are already involved in politics	Yes	14(12.7)	23(20.9)	37(33.6)	$\chi^2 = 1.737(.420)$
	No	17(15.5)	41(37.3)	58(52.7)	
	Don't know	3(2.7)	12(10.9)	15(13.6)	
Party politics leads toward rivalry/conflict among different student factions.	Yes	24(21.8)	69(62.7)	93(84.5)	$\chi^2 = 7.341(.025)$
	No	7(6.4)	5(4.5)	12(10.9)	
	Don't know	3(2.7)	2(1.8)	5(4.5)	
Politics in universities may have adverse effects on the nation progress	Yes	10(9.1)	52(47.3)	62(56.4)	$\chi^2 = 19.217(.000)$
	No	21(19.1)	15(13.6)	36(32.7)	
	Don't know	3(2.7)	9(8.2)	12(10.9)	
The students involvement in politics is not in the national interests	Yes	16(14.5)	45(40.9)	61(55.5)	$\chi^2 = 5.181(.075)$
	No	16(14.5)	20(18.2)	36(32.7)	
	Don't know	2(1.8)	11(10.0)	13(11.8)	
Affiliation of students with political parties results in formation of different student factions in educational institution	Yes		71(64.5)	99(90.0)	$\chi^2 = 4.106(.128)$
	No	28(25.5)			
	Don't know	4(3.6)	2(1.8)	6(5.5)	
Students join political parties for securing popularity and power in the institution	Yes	26(23.6)	60(54.5)	86(78.2)	$\chi^2 = 0.917(.632)$
	No	6(5.5)	9(8.2)	15(13.6)	
	Don't know	2(1.8)	7(6.4)	9(8.2)	
By participating in party politics students learns art of speaking publicly	Yes	24(21.8)	37(33.6)	61(55.5)	$\chi^2 = 8.729(.013)$
	No	5(4.5)	33(30.0)	38(34.5)	
	Don't know	5(4.5)	6(5.5)	11(10.0)	

*Values in the table present frequency while values in the parenthesis represent percentages proportion of the respondents.

Relationship between students' involvement in the party politics and teachers' perception on students' involvement in the party politics

We find no association between students should purely focus on their studies or get involved in party politics. The result indirectly depicts importance of the fact that along with studies, students' participation in co-curricular activities is essential for physical and mental grooming. If on one hand, more opportunities for students to take part in healthy activities minimize students' participation in non-healthy activities. On the other hand, it may provide a conducive environment for students for their academic development. This may reflect how important co-curricular activities are in the eyes of respondents.

We find negative and significant association ($p < 0.05$) between involvement in political activities and academic performance of students. The finding suggests that students' involvement in party politics may distract their attention from their studies which may lead to strikes and conflicts that may affect the overall academic environment of the university. This result is supported by Altbach (1993), who showed that students' involvement in politics disrupts the academic activities in the universities.

Moreover, we find significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship between the participation in politics and diversion of the attention from studies. The finding suggests that indulging in political activities during studies, may have negative impact on academic performance. Students, being young and immature can easily be manipulated and misused by experienced politicians for their own interests. Hence, students' attention may be diverted from studies and cause them irreparable loss to the whole nation.

Gibson (2001) has shown a similar association.

We show a strong link between students' involvement in party politics and resultant rivalry and/or on campus conflict among different student factions. We interpret this association as students being young and emotional can easily be influenced by politicians. Various parties involved in on campus politics may have political rivalries. Such rivalries lead to violent conflicts among different student groups, violation of discipline, and even loss of lives. Similar results were drawn by Long (2004); Near (2003) where they concluded the major cause of clash and conflict between student groups as political difference among parties. We show a strong positive (significant with $p < 0.05$) association between the students' involvement in on campus politics and consequent poor development of their professional abilities may hamper a nation's progress; as it is seen by their opinion leaders. In other words, politicization of seats of learning, i.e., universities may slow down a nation's progress. It could be easily inferred that using university students as apparatus and campus as political platforms could have disastrous impact on the future growth of a country. Similar findings have shown by Cone and David (2001) where they asserted that political parties should not be allowed to use universities as their seed fields because this practice destroys the national progress and exploits students.

We find no relationship between students' politics and promotion of the national interests. As affiliations of students with political parties results in formation of different student unions in educational institution as perceived by their teachers, which could be a reflection of the existing

social divide based on caste and creed, and religious sects. For instance, in Kohat University mostly students' groups are established on the basis of ethnicity or regional affiliations like *Wazir*, *Afridi*, *Khattak* student federations. Such groups further widen the existing ethnic divide and did not serve the nation's interest.

We find no association between students joining of political parties for securing popularity and power in the institution, and teachers' perception on student party politics. This finding could be due to the understanding that mostly students are immature and are not aware of the rules of games of power and politics. A large majority of the students are caught into this quagmire only because of their immaturity and innocence. It is observed that sometime they even do not reveal their involvement in on-the-campus politics to their families.

As per our expectations, we find a positive and significant ($p < 0.05$) relationship between involvement of the students in party politics and improvement of their skills to speak in public. The finding suggests that students who participate in on campus political activities have better speaking skills than those who are not involved in the politics. Similar findings are suggested by Delli (2000) who established that the art of public speaking develops in students who participate in politics; however, disadvantages are reported to be more.

Analysis of the difference between male and female opinion leader's (teacher's) perception of students' involvement in party politics

To verify the consistency of the above discussed, we further conduct T-Test analysis of the difference between male and female teacher's perception of students' party politics. The results are shown in Table No. 2.

Table No. 2

Group	N	T
Male	87	
Female	23	1.05
Total	110	
P<.05	Critical t-value	1.96

The result shows a t-value of 1.05, whereas the critical t-value is 1.96 at ($p < 0.05$) level of significance (See Table No. 2). Based on the findings, we accept the null hypothesis and reject the alternate hypothesis. It means that there is no significant difference with reference to gender and teacher's perception of students' party politics and hence our results are consistent.

Analysis of the difference between urban and rural teacher's perception of student's party politics

Moreover, to verify our findings based on the geographic location of the opinion leader, we carry out test of independence (by using T-Test analysis) and show the difference between perception of the leaders belonging to the urban and rural areas. The results are presented in Table No. 3.

Table No. 3

Category	N	T
Urban	70	
Rural	40	1.90
Total	110	
P<.05	Critical t-value	1.96

According to the above given results, we accept the null hypothesis, i.e., there is no significant difference with references to geographic location. It means that there is no significant difference among rural and urban people regarding perception on the issue (See Table 3).

Analysis of the difference between married and unmarried teacher's perception of student's party politics

Finally, to show how marital status of the respondent can affect his/her opinion, we use test of independence to see the difference between married and unmarried teacher's perception of student's party politics in Table No. 4.

Table No. 4

Category	N	T
Married	59	
Unmarried	51	1.73
Total	110	
P<.05	Critical t-value	1.96

Once again we accept null hypothesis, i.e., there is no significant difference with reference to marital status and teacher's perception of students' party politics, and reject alternate hypothesis (See Table No. 4). It implies that there is no significant difference of opinion on the issue on the basis of marital status upon teacher's perception of the issue.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of findings, it is concluded that students' involvement in party politics may politicize academic institutions which may divert their attention from their core objective i.e. their academic development.

The findings of this study are in line with the orthodox school of thought where political involvement of students in party politics is considered as the waste of time, root cause of various ills, i.e. rivalries among student factions, indiscipline, violent

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conflict, that might be harmful for national progress in long term.

Contrary to this, the favorable perception of the academia on development of the art of public speaking among students is a positive aspect derived from our findings. So, we may say that, one aspect of our findings supports moderate approach on the issue.

Moreover, our results are consistent (as shown by the t-test of independence) which reveals that all the groups (i.e., male and female, urban and rural, and married and unmarried) of opinion leaders (teaching faculty) have similar approach on the issue. They consider involvement of students in politics as a detrimental for both their self-development as well as academic environment of the Universities and hence for nation's progress.

Since our data set corresponds geographically to a tribal set-up, where conventional politics has little space, therefore, we expect strong stance on the issue. Moreover, since the survey area has seen worse kind of political turbulence over the years, the orthodox approach may more be relevant in such political environment. We interpret this as a reaction to political situation marked by violence. To investigate further the impact of political violence on participation of masses in political process is left for future research work. We also feel a need for exposing the academia and students of educational institutes that are surrounded by such a difficult political situation to institutes/regions which has long history and exposure to the political culture.

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