Student Political Participation in Gujarat: A Comparative Study of Campus Political Organisations

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Abstract

Student political participation has historically played a crucial role in shaping democratic values and political leadership in India. This study examines the nature and extent of student political participation in Gujarat, with specific reference to the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and the National Students' Union of India (NSUI). Adopting a quantitative, descriptive research design, primary data were collected from 80 student members from Ahmedabad and Vadodara using a semi-structured interview schedule. The study analyses respondents' socio-economic and political profiles, motivations for political involvement, on-campus and off-campus participation, ideological views on religion, caste-based reservation, and economic liberalisation, and the perceived impact of political engagement on education and personal life. The findings reveal that campus politics predominantly attracts urban, male students from middle-income backgrounds and serves as an important site of political socialisation and leadership development. However, academic distraction, financial burden, and social risks also emerge as significant challenges. The study underscores the need for inclusive and regulated campus political practices to strengthen democratic engagement in higher education.

Keywords: Student Politics, Political Participation, Impact, ABVP, NSUI.

1. Introduction

Students have historically occupied a distinctive and influential position in society, particularly in the political sphere. As Lipset aptly observed, any attempt to analyse the future of politics without considering students risks serious error (Hazary, 1987). Students constitute one of the most informed, dynamic, and progressive segments of society. Owing to their education, youthful idealism, relative freedom from family and occupational responsibilities, and heightened political awareness, they represent a readily mobilisable social force. Their political attitudes and behaviours are of enduring significance, as they shape not only immediate political outcomes but also the long-term political culture of society.

Globally, student political activism has emerged as a powerful phenomenon, especially since the 1960s. Despite its often transient and episodic nature, student movements have played a decisive role in social revolutions, policy reforms, and even the overthrow of governments, particularly in developing countries. In India, students have repeatedly acted as catalysts of political change—both through agitational politics and constructive social engagement.

Student politics, therefore, encompasses a wide range of dimensions, including political attitudes, electoral participation, leadership patterns, mobilisation strategies, campus governance, and the interface between educational institutions and the broader political system.

In the Indian context, student political participation evolved significantly during the freedom struggle. From relative political quietude in the late nineteenth century, students became active participants in nationalist movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement. These movements not only politicised campuses but also established students as an integral component of mass politics. Post-independence, however, the nature of student politics underwent a marked transformation. What was once considered patriotic engagement increasingly came to be labelled as indiscipline, and overt political mobilisation on campuses faced growing resistance from both the state and academic authorities.

Nevertheless, student organisations continued to proliferate, often aligning themselves—explicitly or implicitly—with mainstream political parties. In this context, student unions and organisations became important training grounds for future political leadership, while also serving as arenas for contestation over ideology, identity, and power. Among the various student organisations in India, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and the National Students' Union of India (NSUI) have emerged as the most prominent, reflecting the ideological orientations of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Indian National Congress respectively.

Gujarat occupies a unique place in the history of student politics in India. The Nav Nirman Movement of 1973–74 marked a watershed moment, demonstrating the potential of student-led mobilisation to address broader societal issues such as corruption, inflation, unemployment, and governance failure. The movement not only led to the dissolution of the Gujarat State Assembly but also inspired similar mass agitations elsewhere in the country. Since then, student politics in Gujarat has remained closely intertwined with state and national political dynamics, particularly with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the continued contestation between the BJP and the Congress.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine student political participation on university campuses in Gujarat, with specific reference to ABVP and NSUI. It aims to explore the socio-political profile of student participants, the factors motivating their involvement in campus politics, and the nature of their on-campus and off-campus political activities. Further, the study investigates students' perceptions regarding religion, caste-based reservation, and economic liberalisation, as well as the perceived impact of political participation on their education, career aspirations, and personal and social life. By focusing on these dimensions, the study attempts to contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary student politics in Gujarat and its broader implications for democratic participation and political socialisation in India.

2. Methodology

2.1.1 Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative approach using a descriptive research design. This design was selected to systematically describe (i) the socio-demographic and political profile of student participants, (ii) their views on religion, caste-based reservation, and economic liberalisation

(post-1991), (iii) their perceptions of organisational positions on these issues, (iv) factors motivating entry into campus politics, (v) patterns of on-campus and off-campus political participation, and (vi) perceived effects of political participation on education, career aspirations, and personal/social life.

2.1.2 Study Setting and Population

The study was conducted in Gujarat State, focusing on two major educational centres—Ahmedabad and Vadodara—selected due to the presence of diverse higher educational institutions and the inflow of students from various regions of Gujarat. The study population comprised college-going students (18–26 years) associated with either ABVP or NSUI.

- **Sampling Design and Sample Size**

The universe of the study included students affiliated with ABVP or NSUI in Gujarat. A total sample of 80 respondents was covered, with 40 respondents from Ahmedabad and 40 from Vadodara.

- **Sampling Technique**

A non-probability (non-random) sampling strategy was used due to the unavailability of an official list of members. The study employed a combination of:

- **Purposive sampling:** initial respondents were identified with the help of key office-bearers of ABVP and NSUI.

- **Snowball sampling:** subsequent respondents were reached through referrals from already-interviewed participants.

This approach enabled access to active members and office-bearers involved in student political activities.

- **Sources of Data**

- **Primary data:** collected from students associated with ABVP or NSUI in Gujarat.

- **Secondary data:** drawn from relevant books, journals, magazines, research reports, and online sources to frame the background and support interpretation.

- **Tool for Data Collection**

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of 75 questions, developed in alignment with the objectives of the study. The schedule contained both:

- **Closed-ended items** (for profiling, participation measures, and opinion patterns), and

- **Open-ended items** (to capture perceptions, motivations, and experiences in respondents' own words).

- **Procedure for Data Collection**

A pre-test was conducted with two students to check clarity and relevance, after which minor modifications were made to the schedule. Before each interview, the researcher:

1. explained the purpose and objectives of the study,

2. obtained informed consent using a consent form prepared in English and Gujarati, and

3. conducted interviews in Gujarati and English, while recording responses in English for consistency in documentation.

Each interview took approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. Interviews were conducted at locations convenient to respondents, including hostels, college premises, gardens, homes, and organisation offices, and were scheduled based on respondents' availability (day or evening).

2.1.3 Key Measures and Operational Focus

The study operationalised major concepts as follows:

- **Motivating factors:** peer influence, family political background, personal agreement with organisation ideology, and influence of political role models.

- **Profile variables:** age, sex, caste, religion, region (urban/rural), state of origin, educational level, parents' education, and family political involvement/positions.

- **Views on key issues:** respondents' attitudes towards other religions, caste-based reservation, and post-1991 economic liberalisation.

- **On-campus participation:** membership/office-bearership in student organisations, contesting/working in campus elections, organising meetings, and participation in protests on academic/campus issues.

- **Off-campus participation:** party membership/roles outside campus, campaigning in political elections, attending party meetings, and contact with political leaders.

- **Perceived impacts:** effects on academic concentration and attendance, exam performance, career ambitions (including political career prospects), and family/social relations.

2.1.4 Plan of Data Analysis

The analysis primarily involved descriptive statistical techniques to summarise respondent characteristics and participation patterns (e.g., frequencies and percentages). Comparative analysis was used to examine differences between ABVP and NSUI respondents across key variables such as motivations, participation intensity, and perceived effects on education and life.

2.1.5 Scope of the Study

The study focused on student members of ABVP and NSUI in Gujarat and examined dimensions beyond "student indiscipline," including political socialisation, issue-based orientations, organisational perceptions, participation patterns, and perceived outcomes of political involvement.

2.1.6 Limitations

- Use of non-random sampling limits representativeness and wider generalisation to all student members across Gujarat.

- Data were collected only in Ahmedabad and Vadodara, hence findings are more applicable to students studying in these cities.

- Interviews were occasionally disrupted due to respondents' organisational commitments (calls/visitors).

- Female respondents could not be included due to vacation timing and organisational engagements, limiting gender-based comparison.

2.1.7   Researcher's Field Experience

Data collection was conducted during vacation months, extending the fieldwork period and requiring the researcher to travel to multiple sites based on respondents' convenience. The process facilitated rapport-building and provided exposure to real-time student mobilisations and political activities, enriching the researcher's professional learning as a social work scholar.

3.   Key Findings

The present study highlights important patterns and trends in student political participation within higher education institutions. The findings provide insights into the socio-economic, ideological, and organisational factors influencing students' involvement in campus politics, as well as the nature and consequences of such participation.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Age Group (Years)	18–20	40.0
	21–23	42.5
	Above 23	17.5
Gender	Male	100.0
	Female	0.0
Religion	Hindu	93.8
	Muslim	3.8
	Jain	1.2
	Sikh	1.2

The findings of the study indicate that student political participation is closely linked with the socio-economic background, ideological orientation, and organisational affiliation of the respondents. A majority of the respondents were young students, with 42.5 per cent belonging to the age group of 21–23 years and 40.0 per cent in the 18–20 years category, indicating that campus politics largely attracts early youth. All respondents were male due to the non-availability of female students during the data collection period, highlighting a gender imbalance in student political participation. Religiously, an overwhelming majority of the respondents (93.8 per cent) belonged to the Hindu community, while Muslims constituted only

3.8 per cent, and Jain and Sikh respondents accounted for 1.2 per cent each, reflecting limited religious diversity in campus political organisations.

Table 2: Caste, Region, and Educational Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Caste	Other Backward Classes (OBC)	35.8
	Vaishya	28.3
	Kshatriya	19.3
	Brahmin	16.6
Region	Urban	75.0
	Rural	22.5
Educational Stream	Commerce	43.8
	Science	17.5
	Arts	15.0
Level of Education	Graduation	70.0
	Postgraduation	23.8
	Diploma	6.2

Caste-wise analysis showed that students from Other Backward Classes formed the largest group (35.8 per cent), followed by Vaishya (28.3 per cent), Kshatriya (19.3 per cent), and Brahmin (16.6 per cent), indicating that although students from higher castes dominated campus politics, representation from backward classes was also significant. Regionally, campus political participation was largely urban-centric, with 75.0 per cent of respondents belonging to urban areas and only 22.5 per cent from rural backgrounds. In terms of educational background, students from Commerce streams constituted the largest proportion (43.8 per cent), followed by science (17.5 per cent) and Arts (15.0 per cent). Most respondents were pursuing graduation (70.0 per cent), while 23.8 per cent were postgraduates and 6.2 per cent were diploma holders.

Table 3: Economic and Political Background of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Occupational Status (Along with Studies)	Engaged in part-time occupation	37.5
	Not engaged in part-time occupation	62.5
Type of Occupation *(among working respondents)*	Business	60.0
	Other occupations	40.0

Monthly Family Income (₹)	10,001–30,000	48.8
	30,001–60,000	26.2
	Other income groups	25.0
Family Political Background	Yes	25.0
	No	75.0
Nature of Political Position	Party office bearer	53.8
	Corporator	15.4
	Student organisation	23.1

Economically, campus politics appeared to be dominated by relatively well-off students. About 37.5 per cent of the respondents were engaged in part-time occupations in addition to their studies, and among them, 60.0 per cent were involved in business activities. Family income data revealed that 48.8 per cent of respondents belonged to families earning between ₹10,001 and ₹30,000 per month, while 26.2 per cent had a family income between ₹30,001 and ₹60,000, indicating predominance of middle and upper-middle-income families. Regarding family political background, 25.0 per cent of respondents reported having a family member in politics, while 75.0 per cent did not. Among those with political family backgrounds, 65.0 per cent reported that their family members held positions in political parties, most commonly as party office bearers (53.8 per cent), corporators (15.4 per cent), or associated with student organisations (23.1 per cent).

Table 4: Ideological Orientation of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Religious Equality (Personal Belief)	Support	85.0
	Do not support	15.0
Religious Equality (Perceived Societal Practice)	Religions treated unequally	86.2
	Religions treated equally	13.8
Caste-Based Reservation	Oppose	57.5
	Support	42.5
Economic Liberalisation	Support	86.2
	Oppose	13.8

Ideologically, a large majority of respondents (85.0 per cent) personally believed in treating all religions equally, while 15.0 per cent did not support religious equality. However, when asked about societal practice, a substantial majority (86.2 per cent) felt that religions were not treated equally in contemporary India. On caste-based reservation, more than half of the respondents (57.5 per cent) opposed reservation, whereas 42.5 per cent supported it. Those opposing

reservation largely felt that it negatively affected the general category (96.4 per cent), while supporters viewed it as necessary for the upliftment of deprived sections (97.1 per cent). Economic liberalisation received strong support, with 86.2 per cent of respondents favouring liberalisation policies, mainly due to employment generation and economic growth, while 13.8 per cent opposed it citing environmental degradation, privatisation of education, and rising prices.

Table 5: Level of Student Political Participation

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Position in Student Organisation	Ordinary member	56.2
	Office bearer	43.8
Participation in Organisational Activities	Always participate	67.5
	Others	32.5
Attendance at Meetings	Regular	72.5
	Irregular	27.5
Contested University Elections	Yes	41.2
	No	58.8
Election Outcome *(among contestants)*	Elected	75.8
	Not elected	24.2
Presence of College Union	Yes	57.5
	No	42.5
Contested College Elections *(where union exists)*	Yes	28.2
	No	71.8

The study revealed a high level of participation in on-campus politics. More than half of the respondents (56.2 per cent) were ordinary members of student organisations, while a substantial proportion (43.8 per cent) held office-bearer positions. A large majority (67.5 per cent) always participated in organisational activities and 72.5 per cent regularly attended meetings. However, only 41.2 per cent of respondents contested university elections, and among them, 75.8 per cent were successfully elected. Regarding college unions, 57.5 per cent of respondents reported having a college union, but only 28.2 per cent of them contested college-level elections

Table 6: Election Expenditure and Attitudes toward Campus Elections

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
	Spent money	83.4

Election Expenditure *(among contestants)*	Did not spend money	16.6
Source of Election Funds	Parents	88.6
	Friends	48.6
	Student organisations	45.7
Preference for Election Method	Support elections	92.5
	Prefer nomination	7.5

Campus elections were found to be financially demanding, as 83.4 per cent of respondents who contested elections reported spending money. The main sources of election expenditure were parents (88.6 per cent), friends (48.6 per cent), and student organisations (45.7 per cent). Despite financial and organisational challenges, an overwhelming majority (92.5 per cent) supported conducting elections rather than adopting nomination processes, citing democratic values, leadership development, and political exposure as major reasons.

Table 7: Off-Campus Political Participation of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Political Party Membership	Yes	46.2
	No	53.8
Party Affiliation by Organisation	NSUI members affiliated	65.0
	ABVP members affiliated	27.5
Attendance at Political Meetings	Never attended	51.2
	Attended	48.8

Off-campus political participation was comparatively limited. Less than half of the respondents (46.2 per cent) belonged to a political party, with a clear organisational difference: 65.0 per cent of NSUI members were affiliated with political parties compared to only 27.5 per cent of ABVP members. Attendance at political meetings was low, with 51.2 per cent of respondents never attending such meetings. Contesting off-campus elections was extremely rare, with only one respondent reporting participation.

Table 8: Impact of Political Participation on Education

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Impact on Studies	Not distracted	56.2
	Distracted	43.8
	NSUI members	57.5

Academic Distraction by Organisation	ABVP members	35.0

The impact of political participation on education was mixed. While 56.2 per cent of respondents felt that political activities did not distract them from their studies, a considerable proportion (43.8 per cent) reported academic distraction. Negative educational effects were more pronounced among NSUI members (57.5 per cent) than ABVP members (35.0 per cent). At the same time, political participation contributed significantly to personal development: 97.5 per cent reported improvement in leadership skills, 91.2 per cent gained confidence in decision-making, 62.5 per cent enhanced their knowledge of the political system, and 48.8 per cent were motivated to pursue higher studies.

Table 9: Impact of Political Participation on Personal and Social Life

Variable	Category	Frequency (%)
Confrontation with Law / Penal Action	Yes	72.1
	No	27.9
Difficulty in Maintaining Friendships	Yes	32.6
	No	67.4
Family Support in Political Activities	Yes	75.0
	No	25.0
Perception of Future Political Career	Yes	57.5
	No	42.5

Finally, political participation also affected respondents' personal and social lives. A large majority (72.1 per cent) faced confrontation with law or penal action, while 32.6 per cent experienced difficulties in maintaining friendships. Despite these challenges, family support remained strong, with more than three-fourths of respondents receiving family support in protests, elections, and political activities. Overall, 57.5 per cent of respondents believed that campus political participation would help them ensure a future political career, with this perception being stronger among NSUI members (70.0 per cent) than ABVP members (45.0 per cent).

In sum, the study highlights that campus politics plays a crucial role in political socialisation and leadership development among students, particularly those from urban, middle-income, and politically aware backgrounds, while also presenting academic, financial, and social challenges.

4. Implications

The study highlights student politics as a significant site of political socialisation and leadership development in higher education. The predominance of urban, male, and middle-income students in campus politics indicates structural inequalities in participation, underscoring the

need for more inclusive institutional mechanisms to encourage the involvement of women, rural students, and minority groups. The strong ideological orientations of students on issues such as religion, caste-based reservation, and economic liberalisation suggest that student organisations play an important role in shaping political attitudes at an early stage. While political participation enhances leadership skills, confidence, and political awareness, its adverse effects on academic performance, financial burden during elections, and exposure to legal confrontations point to the necessity of regulated and ethical campus political practices. Universities should therefore balance democratic engagement with academic accountability by recognising student politics as a formative, co-curricular process rather than viewing it solely as indiscipline.

5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that student political participation in Gujarat, particularly within ABVP and NSUI, remains a vital component of democratic engagement and political socialisation. Campus politics attracts young, politically aware students and functions as a training ground for leadership and future political careers. Although participation contributes positively to personal development and civic awareness, it also presents academic, financial, and social challenges. Overall, the findings suggest that student politics plays a constructive yet complex role in higher education, warranting supportive and inclusive institutional frameworks to strengthen its democratic potential while minimising its negative consequences.

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