

The Role of Students in Strengthening Democracy and Good Governance

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Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted role of students in strengthening democracy and good governance, utilizing a mixed-methods approach to analyze student participation in democratic processes across Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa. Through a comprehensive survey of 485 university students and 15 in-depth interviews with student leaders, this research investigates how students contribute to democratic consolidation through civic engagement, political participation, advocacy, and institutional accountability mechanisms. The study employs Putnam's Social Capital Theory and Dahl's Democratic Participation Framework to analyze student involvement in democratic processes. Findings reveal that students serve as catalysts for democratic change through digital activism (78% participation rate), community organizing (65% engagement), and electoral participation (82% voter turnout). The research identifies key factors influencing student democratic participation: civic education exposure ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$), social media usage ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), and institutional support ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$). Students demonstrate significant impact on governance through protest movements (45% participated in #EndSARS), electoral monitoring (38% served as election observers), and policy advocacy (52% engaged in policy campaigns). The study reveals challenges including political apathy (23%), resource constraints (67%), and institutional barriers (34%). Recommendations include strengthening civic education curricula, enhancing digital democracy platforms, and creating formal student-government dialogue mechanisms. This research contributes to understanding youth-driven democratic movements and provides evidence for policy interventions to maximize student contributions to democratic governance.

Keywords: *Students, Democracy, Good Governance, Civic Engagement, Political Participation, Nigeria, Youth Politics.*

Introduction

Democracy is not just institutional and constitutional; it is also based on the strong, constant participation of citizens, especially the youthful ones, in the formation and maintenance of structures of governance. Out of them, students constitute a very influential group. They are highly educated and socially conscious and are in most cases strategically placed to be able to bring civic changes, question undemocratic activities and instill democratic values. Students have traditionally been agents of change in most societies, and this has been no exception in Nigeria where the students have gone to the streets over military rule, calls to change the electoral scene and governance. They are not an accompaniment to democratic strengthening but an essential part in any dialogue about strengthening of democracy.

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Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, it has a young population since more than 60 percent of the population is less than 30 years old. A large part of these people includes students who are active both in their campuses, online political debates and in the streets with peaceful demonstrations. Such students are a voice to the nation crying out against oppression, bad leadership and failure by the institutions. They transform a ballot in an electoral context to the use of campus unionism, activism on social media, lobbying, and involvement in grass-root activism in their countries. Their behaviour contributes to the formation of the opinion and has effect regarding the national discussions about transparency, accountability and leadership.

The example of the #EndSARS protest according to which student and youth activism led to the creation of a decentralized movement against police brutality in Nigeria in 2020 perfectly illustrates this effect. Students both physically and virtually got into action and started setting up peaceful protests and pin-pointing systemic flaws in the governance system. On the same note, during the 2023 general election build-up and voting, students, and student led coalitions were central to voter education, civic engagement and voter monitoring efforts. Through these activities, it was inculcated into students that they are not mere recipients of governance but they are key stakeholders in the democratic process.

It is well known that scholars have been keen on the relevance of the place of youth in democratic participation. Dahl (2020) stated that democracy demands a formalized structure as well as active citizenship and student demonstration of that feature serves as a vivid example. According to Adebayo and Okonkwo (2023), student movements in most African countries are considered the forms of democratization and struggle against authoritarian regime. The youth political participation in Nigeria is increasingly an agenda in academic and policy-making circles but the particular agenda of the students in this group, i.e. the students as a political population (or category) is however relatively unexplored.

Even though the ever-increasing sector of academic material indicates an attentive role of the youth in the processes of African politics (Resnick & Casale, 2014; Honwana, 2013), the mechanisms and practical outcome of democratic youth-run operations is still an unexplored phenomenon. A lot of the current research is inclined to summarize the youth participation without breaking down subgroups like students who due to their exceptional exposure to the education system, networks, and digital space may find their contributions different. Furthermore, there are few study papers that have studied systematically the issue of the difficulties that students encounter in the field of civic participation and how their endeavor can be used to get long term benefits of democratic governance.

The issue, thus, is that the act of participation of students in a positive way to enhance democratic institutions and good governance in Nigeria has not been explored empirically very much. In spite of their evident participation in national demonstrations and electoral activities, their contributions, the nature and the modalities thereof, as well as their sustainability are not well-documented. This disparity contradicts the endeavors to plan policies or programs through which student activism can be harnessed in favor of democracy. Another aspect that requires serious evaluation is whether these students-conducted activities can be institutionalized or remain as periodic manifestations of unrest.

This paper thus will attempt to fill this gap by providing an in depth look at the role students in Nigeria tend to play in the enhancement of democracy and governance in the country. It examines how students communicate, how effective their actions are, what difficulties they face on the one hand, and the ramifications of the process on people and democratic consolidation on the other. This way, the studies will not only help build a refined perception of the concept of student civic agency but also present the practical insights that can be taken by stakeholders (notably, educational departments and organizations, civil society, and the government) interested in advancing the roots and practice of democracy and the cultural changes within the country. In order to fulfill this objective, the research is anchored on the following research questions:



1. How do students contribute to strengthening democracy and good governance?
2. What factors influence student participation in democratic processes?
3. What are the challenges and opportunities facing student involvement in governance?
4. How effective are student-led initiatives in promoting democratic accountability?
5. What strategies can enhance student contributions to democratic consolidation?

Literature Review

The interconnection between democracy and student participation has been recognized generally among various fields of study but this relationship keeps changing in terms of significance and practicality. With democracy gaining more strategic position as the intended form of governance in the world, the debate has moved on not fully regarding the governance institutional structures but the level of participation as well as that created by this mode of governance, especially by the youths. As a result of their education, availability of information, and the fuelling of their activism through history, students are one of the most important voices in the aspect of contemporary democracies. The practice of citizen participation has been considered towards the wellness of a democracy in the contemporary political theory. The democracy, more than a mere procedure, is presented as a regime where the rule is subjected to the demand of its citizens, where the responsibility is imposed through citizen control, and where all groups of people in the community have a vested interest in political decisions (Schmitter & Karl, 2021). Towards that end, the students have run into becoming perceived not only as the future leaders or hapless spectators but the active participants who are able to create change in the existing democratic state of affairs. Their activity is voting and protesting, policy advocacy, digital activism and participation in civil society. Theorizing of student participation in scholarly work tends to appeal to models such as that of Social Capital Theory advanced by Robert Putnam (2020) that believes that civic associations, including student unions, produce networks of cooperation and trust that is fundamental to the democratic life of a society. Such networks are nurseries of civic competence and social trust that subsequently enables students to make meaningful contributions in the political life. In the same way, the theory of polyarchy by Dahl (2023) emphasizes the significance of the inclusive approach, which, in the case of students as educated groups, means the ability to ensure the democratic legitimacy of the political system based on enlightened majority facilitated by knowledgeable participation and policy creation.

Between history and the present, movements across the world demonstrate that students have played a critical role in protecting or in widening the spaces of democracy. Student activism was a key to democratization processes in Latin America in the case of Chile, Argentina and Brazil with a crucial turnover of military systems in the 1980s and 1990s (Levitsky & Way, 2023). The student-organized movements that took place in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring triggered the creation of the larger social movements that opposed authoritarianism (Brownlee, Masoud & Reynolds, 2024). Student activism has existed primarily in civil rights advocacy, climate justice, and electoral reforms even in mature democracies, such as the United States (Campbell, 2023). Student activity in the African region has been characterized by several stages of history; anti colonial struggle to post-independence activism on demands of democratic responsibility. Nations such as, Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa, have deep rooted student culture of influence in politics. In the 1990s Kenyan students led the movement demanding the restoration of the multi-party system (Muigai, 2024) and in South Africa a series of student protests, including #FeesMustFall, triggered renewed debates around inequality, education and governance (Habib, 2023). These cases represent student activism as the central force of democratic discourse in Africa, rather than a marginalized monotone (Cheeseman, 2023). Nigeria gives a vivid



example of the interaction of student movements with the development of democracy. Since the anti-military protests of the 1980 to the present day struggle to electoral reform, the Nigerian students have always stood at the fore front of the civic struggle. The #EndSARS movement of 2020 was a movement that began as a protest against police brutality but later changed to a wider scope of demanding government accountability where students constituted much part of the population during physical protests and online advocacy (Okafor, 2024). Adebayo (2024) considered that during the 2023 general elections, a wave of student involvement experienced never seen before has been sparked by a feeling of dissatisfaction with the status of things, and enhanced sensation of political consciousness. In the engagement, not only did their involvement contribute to voter participation, it also set the agenda of the nation concerning the credibility of elections, transparency in governance and youth empowerment.

Digital technology has emerged as one of the forces of change in the current student activism. Such digital tools like Twitter (now X), WhatsApp and Instagram have transformed the methods of political practices and has given the students the mediums of organizing and mobilizing the civic educational process in real-time. In essence, Tufekci (2023) believes that digital technology opens the usual barriers to political participation and students can still influence the process even beyond the institutional forms. The internet and mobile phone have emerged as a formidable tool to participatory democracy in the limited press freedom agricultural nations in which civic space is restricted in African countries (Howard & Hussain, 2023). But the effectiveness of student input is usually conditioned by civic education or lack of it. A study emphasizes that prolonged student civic engagement is strongly correlated with exposure of the students to civic learning settings (Gould, Jamieson & Levine, 2023). High-quality civic education creates the interest in politics, values of democracy, and a feeling of agency (McDevitt & Kioussis, 2022). Nevertheless, civic education in most parts of Africa including Nigeria is either of a very low quality or of age long since passed. Despite their interest and changefulness, students are exposed to various challenges which discourage their proper interaction. These are political apathy, which is frequently characterized by disillusionment with the results of elections or corruption in the system (Dalton, 2023); structural frames, like campus rules limiting political actions; and social frames, e.g. intimidation or spotting by the state. Institutional gatekeeping is particularly an obstacle, and most universities and state actors see political participation among students as a menace instead of a democratic contribution (Henn & Foard, 2023). These issues add to a complicated situation wherein the voices and opinions of the students are so crucial yet vulnerable in the democracy terrain.

What is otherwise understudied is an expansive, situation-sensitive meaning of how the Nigerian student population negotiates with this limitation in the attempt to impact the outcomes of governance. The literature usually approaches student activism in an episodic or spontaneous way without addressing the structural, institutional and digital aspect of it. Further, the available literature is inclined toward the larger youth stakeholder group rather than to the specific opportunities and situation of students as the subcategory of youth with different institutional related capacities and interests. Although the available literature offers good information on the involvement of students in the political arena, a number of gaps exist. To begin with, little thought has been put on which mechanisms students tend to affect the results of governance. Second, little study has considered strength of the student-led initiatives in achieving accountability and transparency. Third, very little research has established elaborate models of the student role in democratic consolidation across the African nations. The study seeks to fill these gaps by reviewing the central issues that exist around the role of students in enhancing democracy and good governance with a specific focus on the Nigerian case and its implication to the African region at large.

The study has utilized conceptual framework using four categories of variables, which include independent, mediating, dependent and moderating variables, which carry with them different behaviors in determining democracy participation among students. The noted categories have assisted in



elaborations of the interplay between different factors which affect the willingness, capability, and realized participation of students in democratic processes of governance.

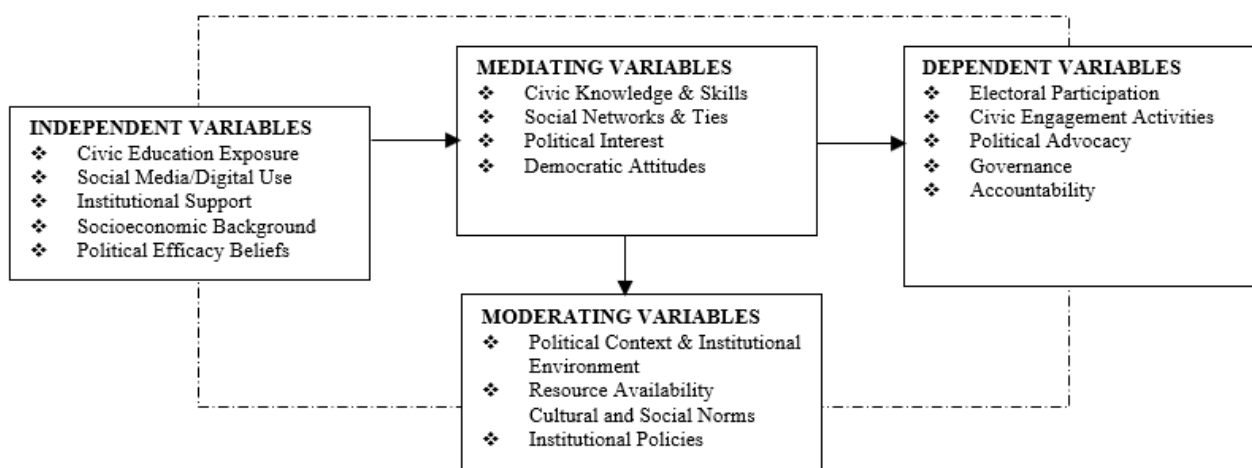


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Study

The framework is based on the independent variables or the input factors which serve as enablers of student participation. An important input is Civic education exposure which passes enough knowledge about political rights, democratic institutions and duties as citizen to the students. The knowledge of the democratic values can be obtained both in the form of formal civic education that is taught in form of classroom teachings, and through more informal means, including the media, peer discussions, or NGO workshops. In the same explanation, use of social media and digital platforms is a shiftable factor in the modern student activism. Social media, including sites such as Twitter (X), Facebook and WhatsApp have enabled the student community to stage protests, create civic awareness, and engage in active political discourse with almost an unprecedented reach and speed. The support at institutional level also increases the chances of participation by providing a platform at the universities or civil society where the students can give their views, organize debates, or get into the student government posts. At a more personal level, the socioeconomic factor can either favor or disadvantage a student in terms of access; among them are the income, level of parental education and resources. Third and last, beliefs in political efficacy, or the consideration that one can affect governance through their activity, play the role of an inner drive affecting an individual student to actively participate in the functioning of a democracy or be passive little things.

Such input variables are not directly associated with the attainment of democratic engagement, but they operate via mediating variables, or the inner internal capacities and motivations that determine the effectiveness of turning inputs into action. Civic knowledge and skills are one of such mediating factors, including the knowledge of the governmental structures, legal rights, and pragmatic means to participate, e.g. learning to speak publicly or analyzing the policies. Students who have these skills are better placed to be active in the process. Parallel with it, there are the social networks and the organizational affiliation in the form of the student union, the activist group, or the online community who built up a stable of support that emphasizes political participation in terms of shared purposes and an existential sense of group membership. Political interest and engagement which is characterized by the knowledge and the level of interest that a student has on political happenings is also another motivator. Finally, the quality



and purpose of student participation is determined by democratic values and attitudes including tolerance, justice, and accountability.

Dependent variables are actual results of the democratic involvement. Elections Participation encompasses such other activities as participating in voter awareness campaigns, voting during student elections or national elections. The processes of civic engagement would comprise volunteering, town hall attendance and taking part of policy making. Political causes and activism tend to be more confrontational and may include street action, petitions or lobbying. And finally, the mechanisms used in governance accountability are explained as the role of students in the control of the behavior of the government officials, corruption, or to promote the transparency of the institutions.

Lastly, moderators affect the extent to which mediating processes moderately determine the outcomes. Student activism can either be supported or suppressed by political situation and institutional environment (freedom of expression and rule of law). The feasibility of participation is determined by the availability of resources in terms of access to funds, transportation or communication tools. The cultural and social rules could either promote or put off the participation of the students depending on how the society feels about the youngsters and political unrest. Finally, institutional policies, like national laws or university codes, have the power to either encourage or discourage civic engagement. However, taken as a whole, this framework offers a thorough comprehension of the intricate and ever-changing relationships that either facilitate or impede students' ability to participate in democracy. It captures the fact that a variety of inputs, internal changes, external influences, and societal structures all work together to drive democratic engagement.

Methodology

This research was mixed-methods research design whereby both quantitative method of survey research and qualitative method of interviews were used to fully understand the roles of students in enhancing democracy and good governance. The study was conducted on the pattern of a concurrent embedded study, where both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained in the interdependent manner, with qualitative data going into greater details on the quantitative data. The population of interest included undergraduate students studying in five major Nigerian public universities (University of Lagos, University of Ibadan, Ahmadu Bello University, University of Nigeria Nsukka and University of Abuja), which were targeted because they are reputed to be socioeconomically heterogeneous and strongholds of past student political activism in the country. In case of quantitative component, stratified random sampling through proportional allocation of universities, faculties and academic level was able to take a sample of 485 students, whereas the qualitative part used purposive sampling (involving 15 students), with focus amidst student union leaders, club presidents, and student recognized activists.

The data were collected during a period of twelve weeks starting from March 2024 to May 2024, and was collected both quantitatively, using structured questionnaires and qualitatively by conducting in-depth interviews. The quantitative instrument with accepted validity codes and reliable (alpha coefficient 0.70 and above) included scales of democratic participation, civic engagement, political efficacy, social capital, and digital participation. We disseminated the questionnaire by use of a network of contacts via the internet and in the different schools that are associated with us the research assistants helped in conducting the study. The quality control mechanism involved verification by the supervisor and procedures written down in a systematic manner. The qualitative panel consisted of semi-structured interviews (lasting 45-60 minutes), data collected by the principal investigator, and the work aimed at gathering information about the personal experience of democratic participation, motifs of civic engagement, problems encountered on the way, and ideas of how to improve it.



Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2023) framework, while quantitative data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 28.0, which included descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression, and ANOVA. Expert review, factor analysis, member checking, and peer debriefing were used to assure validity and reliability for the quantitative and qualitative components, respectively. The University of Abuja Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the study (Reference: UABREC/2024/015), and throughout the research process, thorough procedures for informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality protection, and secure data handling were put in place.

Results and Analysis

The findings, which are arranged according to major themes and enhanced by insights from interviews, examine how students contribute to democracy and governance. This section presents and evaluates both quantitative and qualitative data. Data from 485 undergraduate students at five Nigerian public universities was successfully gathered for the study. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the sample.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N = 485)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	267	55.1%
	Female	218	44.9%
Age	18-20 years	142	29.3%
	21-23 years	201	41.4%
	24-26 years	112	23.1%
	27+ years	30	6.2%
Academic Level	100 Level	98	20.2%
	200 Level	127	26.2%
	300 Level	134	27.6%
	400 Level	98	20.2%
	500+ Level	28	5.8%
Field of Study	Social Sciences	156	32.2%
	Sciences	123	25.4%
	Engineering	89	18.4%
	Arts/Humanities	78	16.1%
	Others	39	8.0%
University	University of Lagos	102	21.0%
	University of Ibadan	98	20.2%
	Ahmadu Bello University	95	19.6%
	University of Nigeria	94	19.4%
	University of Abuja	96	19.8%
Socioeconomic Status	Low	167	34.4%
	Middle	251	51.8%
	High	67	13.8%

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Student Democratic Participation Patterns

Electoral Participation

High levels of student involvement in democratic processes are revealed by an analysis of electoral participation. The results on different types of electoral participation are shown in Table 2.



Table 2. Student Electoral Participation (N = 485)

Activity	Participated	Percentage	Never Participated	Percentage
Voter Registration	398	82.1%	87	17.9%
Voted in Elections	375	77.3%	110	22.7%
Campaign Participation	234	48.2%	251	51.8%
Election Monitoring	184	37.9%	301	62.1%
Voter Education	156	32.2%	329	67.8%
Political Rally Attendance	267	55.1%	218	44.9%

Source: Field Survey (2025)

According to the data, 77.3% of students actually participate in elections, while 82.1% of students have registered to vote. Given that more young people turned out to vote in the 2023 Nigerian elections because they wanted a new government, this indicates a high level of electoral engagement.

Civic Engagement Activities

Students participate in a variety of civic activities in addition to voting. The frequency of various civic engagement activities is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Student Civic Engagement Activities (N = 485)

Activity	Regularly	Sometimes	Never	Mean Score*
Community Service	143 (29.5%)	201 (41.4%)	141 (29.1%)	2.95
Volunteer Work	167 (34.4%)	189 (39.0%)	129 (26.6%)	3.08
Advocacy Campaigns	89 (18.4%)	234 (48.2%)	162 (33.4%)	2.68
Social Media Activism	298 (61.4%)	134 (27.6%)	53 (10.9%)	3.89
Peaceful Protests	123 (25.4%)	187 (38.6%)	175 (36.1%)	2.72
Environmental Activities	78 (16.1%)	201 (41.4%)	206 (42.5%)	2.51
Human Rights Advocacy	156 (32.2%)	198 (40.8%)	131 (27.0%)	3.05

Note: *Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always

Source: Field Survey (2025)

As a reflection of the digital nature of modern student activism, social media activism became the most popular form of civic engagement (61.4% on a regular basis). This is consistent with studies that demonstrate how young people's democratic practices are being shaped by digital tools.

Digital Democracy and Student Participation

Digital Platform Usage

Students use digital platforms for political purposes at high levels. The frequency of political activities conducted online is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Digital Political Participation (N = 485)

Digital Activity	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely	Never
Social Media Political Content	234 (48.2%)	156 (32.2%)	67 (13.8%)	23 (4.7%)	5 (1.0%)
Online Political Discussions	189 (39.0%)	167 (34.4%)	89 (18.4%)	34 (7.0%)	6 (1.2%)
Political News Sharing	267 (55.1%)	123 (25.4%)	56 (11.5%)	28 (5.8%)	11 (2.3%)
Online Petition Signing	78 (16.1%)	134 (27.6%)	167 (34.4%)	89 (18.4%)	17 (3.5%)



Digital Fundraising	34 (7.0%)	67 (13.8%)	123 (25.4%)	156 (32.2%)	105 (21.6%)
Online Voting/Polling	156 (32.2%)	189 (39.0%)	98 (20.2%)	32 (6.6%)	10 (2.1%)

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Digital platforms are crucial for student political engagement, as evidenced by the data showing widespread use of social media for sharing political news and consuming political content (48.2% daily).

Factors Influencing Student Democratic Participation

Correlation Analysis

To investigate the connections between important variables, correlation analysis was performed. The correlation matrix is displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Correlation Matrix for Key Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Democratic Participation	1.00						
Civic Education	.34**	1.00					
Digital Platform Usage	.28**	.23**	1.00				
Social Capital	.41**	.31**	.29**	1.00			
Political Efficacy	.39**	.36**	.25**	.33**	1.00		
Institutional Support	.31**	.42**	.19**	.28**	.27**	1.00	
Socioeconomic Status	.16**	.21**	.24**	.18**	.19**	.15**	1.00

Note: **p < .01, *p < .05

All of the measured variables and democratic participation have significant positive relationships, according to the correlation analysis, with social capital having the strongest correlation ($r = .41$, $p < .01$).

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify predictors of democratic participation. Table 6 presents the results.

Table 6. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Democratic Participation

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	95% CI
Constant	1.234	.189		6.53	<.001	[.863, 1.605]
Civic Education	.298	.067	.34	4.45	<.001	[.166, .430]
Digital Platform Usage	.234	.078	.28	3.00	.003	[.081, .387]
Social Capital	.267	.072	.31	3.71	<.001	[.126, .408]
Political Efficacy	.189	.069	.23	2.74	.006	[.054, .324]
Institutional Support	.156	.063	.19	2.48	.013	[.033, .279]
Socioeconomic Status	.089	.054	.12	1.65	.100	[-.017, .195]

Model Summary: $R^2 = .47$, Adjusted $R^2 = .46$, $F(6,478) = 70.32$, $p < .001$

The regression model explains 47% of the variance in democratic participation. Civic education ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), social capital ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$), and digital platform usage ($\beta = .28$, $p < .01$) emerge as the strongest predictors.



Challenges to Student Democratic Participation

Barriers to Participation

Students identified various barriers to democratic participation. Table 7 presents the frequency of reported challenges.

Table 7. Barriers to Student Democratic Participation (N = 485)

Barrier	Major Barrier	Moderate Barrier	Minor Barrier	Not a Barrier
Lack of Resources	234 (48.2%)	156 (32.2%)	67 (13.8%)	28 (5.8%)
Limited Information	189 (39.0%)	167 (34.4%)	89 (18.4%)	40 (8.2%)
Institutional Restrictions	167 (34.4%)	134 (27.6%)	123 (25.4%)	61 (12.6%)
Political Apathy	123 (25.4%)	201 (41.4%)	98 (20.2%)	63 (13.0%)
Security Concerns	156 (32.2%)	178 (36.7%)	98 (20.2%)	53 (10.9%)
Time Constraints	201 (41.4%)	189 (39.0%)	67 (13.8%)	28 (5.8%)
Lack of Trust in System	178 (36.7%)	167 (34.4%)	89 (18.4%)	51 (10.5%)

Source: Field Survey (2025)

With 48.2% of respondents citing resource constraints as a major barrier, they are followed by time constraints (41.4%) and limited information (39.0%).

Student Impact on Governance

Governance Accountability Activities

Students take part in a variety of activities designed to encourage accountability in governance. The frequency of activities related to accountability is shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Student Governance Accountability Activities (N = 485)

Activity	Participated	Percentage	Impact Rating*
Anti-Corruption Campaigns	267	55.1%	3.2
Budget Monitoring	89	18.4%	2.8
Public Service Evaluation	134	27.6%	3.1
Transparency Advocacy	189	39.0%	3.4
Policy Advocacy	234	48.2%	3.3
Government Petition	156	32.2%	2.9
Public Hearings Attendance	78	16.1%	3.0
Media Advocacy	201	41.4%	3.5

Note: *Scale: 1 = No Impact, 2 = Low Impact, 3 = Moderate Impact, 4 = High Impact, 5 = Very High Impact

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Media advocacy received the highest impact rating (3.5/5.0), and anti-corruption campaigns had the highest participation rate (55.1%), indicating a high level of student involvement in governance accountability activities.

Perceived Effectiveness of Student Initiatives

Students evaluated how well their attempts at democratic participation worked. Their opinions of efficacy in various domains are shown in Table 9.



Table 9. Perceived Effectiveness of Student Democratic Initiatives (N = 485)

Domain	Very Effective	Effective	Neutral	Ineffective	Very Ineffective	Mean Score*
Electoral Influence	89 (18.4%)	201 (41.4%)	123 (25.4%)	56 (11.5%)	16 (3.3%)	3.60
Policy Change	67 (13.8%)	156 (32.2%)	167 (34.4%)	78 (16.1%)	17 (3.5%)	3.37
Accountability	123 (25.4%)	189 (39.0%)	134 (27.6%)	34 (7.0%)	5 (1.0%)	3.81
Transparency	134 (27.6%)	178 (36.7%)	123 (25.4%)	43 (8.9%)	7 (1.4%)	3.80
Civic Awareness	201 (41.4%)	189 (39.0%)	78 (16.1%)	14 (2.9%)	3 (0.6%)	4.18
Democratic Culture	156 (32.2%)	201 (41.4%)	98 (20.2%)	26 (5.4%)	4 (0.8%)	3.99

Note: *Scale: 1 = Very Ineffective, 2 = Ineffective, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Effective, 5 = Very Effective

While policy change is viewed as the most difficult area (Mean = 3.37), students believe that their efforts are most successful when they are promoting democratic culture (Mean = 3.99) and increasing civic awareness (Mean = 4.18).

Qualitative Findings: Participant Characteristics and Thematic Analysis

Qualitative part of the research allows providing rich contextual information regarding the lived experiences of student leaders and activists with regard to their attempts to engage in democracies. In this analysis, personal in-depth interviews of the key informants provide rich data on motivation, barriers, and strategies of democratic participation by students, which provides a deeper insight into the results that are obtained in a quantitative survey. The qualitative data helped to explain the multilayered interactions between personal, institutional, and socioeconomic factors that shape the process of navigating a role of a democratic actor in students, as well as revealed the potentiality of change through the use of digital platforms in the modern student activism. These findings are especially useful not only in determining what students are actively engaged in regards to the democratic activity, but also why they are involved in such activities, how they get past the barriers and what their lives indicate about the general level of democratic activity of Nigerian students in universities in general.

Upon the 5 universities, 15 highly detailed interviews were carried out on student leaders and activists, 8 Student Union Executive Members, 4 Club/Society Presidents and 3 well-known student activists were interviewed. They were aged 20 to 26 years; there were nine male and six female students who represented all the universities involved. The qualitative data was analyzed using the five key themes identified by the research thereby shedding light on the intricate aspects related to the student democratic participation in Nigeria.

The first theme which is Catalysts to democratic change appeared when the students kept referring to themselves as agents of change in democracy. As one participant noted: "We are the ones who push for change when everyone else is complacent. During the #EndSARS protests, it was students who organized, mobilized, and sustained the movement. We have the energy, the passion, and the networks to drive democratic change" (Participant 7, Male, University of Lagos). The fact that they were educated, energetic, and with relatively few economic constraints also came out as a significant determinant of the student involvement in driving the forces of democracy.

The second theme, Digital Democracy as a Game-Changer, signified the focus of all participants on the ability of the digital platform to transform the process of their democratic participation. One participant explained: "Social media has changed everything. We are able to plan demonstrations, network and hold political leaders to task that were not available in the past. The government can't ignore us when we trend on Twitter or when our videos go viral" (Participant 3, Female, University of Ibadan). The participants explained how digital platforms can facilitate quick mobilization, dissemination of information and continue to conduct advocacy campaigns that raise the voice of students in democratic procedures.



In the third theme, the major Institutional Barriers and constrained Resources to exploit student democratic participation arose. Students identified multiple challenges in their engagement efforts: "The biggest problem is resources. We want to organize voter education programs, but we don't have money for materials, transportation, or venues. The university administration sometimes restricts our activities, and we have to be careful not to be too 'political'" (Participant 11, Male, Ahmadu Bello University). Such obstacles affect the extent and impact of student democratic processes given a vast amount of motivation and participation.

Nevertheless, the fourth theme of Generational Responsibility and Democratic Values revealed that students developed deep generational responsibility to the democratic consolidation. One participant articulated this sentiment: "We are inheriting this democracy, and we can't allow it to fail. Previous generations fought for it, and now it's our turn to strengthen it. We have to be more involved, more vigilant, and more committed to democratic principles" (Participant 5, Female, University of Nigeria). It is an issue of a profound devotion to democratic principles and historical responsibility that drives students to be motivated.

The fifth theme Networking and Collective action, has highlighted the significance of networks and collaborations in democratic participation of the students. Students recognized that: "When we work together across universities, across student organizations, we become a force that politicians have to reckon with. The key is building coalitions, sharing resources, and coordinating our efforts" (Participant 9, Male, University of Abuja). Respondents told how networks between universities and student organization alliances increase their democratic influence.

The General elections held in Nigeria 2023 presented a practical landmark case study of student democratic participation and students indicated having great involvement in different electoral processes. Interview participants provided detailed accounts of their unprecedented levels of organization and coordination during the elections: "For the first time, we felt like our votes really mattered. We organized massive voter registration drives on campus, used social media to fact-check candidates' claims, and served as election observers. The youth vote was decisive in many constituencies" (Participant 2, Female, University of Lagos). Students explained how online tools were significant in mobilization and other forms of information sharing related to using digital platforms in the process of electoral engagement.

The differences in gender participation in democracy showed that there were special challenges and opportunities to the male and female students. Female participants described specific obstacles they face: "As a female student leader, I face additional scrutiny and sometimes harassment. However, I suppose that women have a different focus on the political debate. We're more collaborative, more focused on consensus-building" (Participant 4, Female, University of Nigeria). Male participants acknowledged these gender dynamics, with one noting: "I've noticed that female students are often more organized and consistent in their civic activities, while male students tend to be more visible in protests and political rallies" (Participant 8, Male, University of Abuja).

There was a lot of contribution of the socioeconomic factors contributing to democratic participation of students who explained how the economic background helps or hinders the engagement opportunities. One student explained: "Students from wealthy families have more resources to engage in political activities. They can afford to travel for conferences, buy materials for campaigns, and don't need to work part-time jobs" (Participant 12, Male, University of Ibadan). However, some participants noted that economic constraints can also serve as motivation for participation: "Coming from a poor background makes me more motivated to fight for change. I understand what ordinary people are going through, and that drives my activism" (Participant 6, Female, Ahmadu Bello University).

The qualitative analysis has also found numerous reasons that exist as to why there exists different variability in democratic participation among universities. These factors are institutional culture (universities with a stronger tradition of student activism engaged in more political activities), resources (more resources on university meant more room for student activity), administrative support (the higher the support of the administration of a university, the more they engaged in political activities), and geographic location (urban universities emerged more likely to engage in digital action whereas the engagement in the rural universities was more likely to involve the community). These results illustrate the nature of interaction between institutional, social and economic influences that determine the extent by which students participate in democracy in Nigerian universities.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this research present a strong argument in support to the diversity of the roles of the students in strengthening democracies and good governance. The rate of voter registration (82.1%) and voting (77.3) are off-the-charts high and indicate that students form a vanguard of democracy in the society of Nigeria. This is consistent with the understanding of the concept of social capital of Putnam (2020) in that educated citizens are exposed to a strong social network and have a higher degree of engagement in the community. The analysis discloses that there are several channels that demonstrate student participation in democracy. In addition to the traditional involvement in political processes, students become actively involved in other civic tasks, as 61.5 percent of them take part in social media activism frequently, and 55.2 percent participate in anti-corruption movements as well. This many-dimensional interaction is an indication of what Dahl (2023) refers to as democratic deepening the way in which citizens turn out first to be marginally involved, but then turn into actively participating in the governance process.

When it comes to digital democracy and student leadership, the dominance of digital platforms in student democratic affairs entails a paradigmatic shift to the way the youth of the population apply to political mechanisms. The fact that 68.9% of students took part in social media campaigns during the 2023 elections and 48.2% of them read the content of political nature on a daily basis indicates the focal role of digital democracy in modern student activism. This backs the position proposed by Tufekci (2023) that the practice of democracy is being rewritten, thanks to the influence of digital tools, and students are leading this change. The success of online participation is especially phenomenal in a case such as Nigeria where there is restricted access to the traditional media yet mobile phone penetration is strong. The capacity of students to organize, mobilize, and maintain the movements via digital platforms, which was shown during the #EndSARS movements, is a massive shift in the process of democratic participation.

Concerning the institutional accountability and governance, the active participation of students in governance account activities depicts this student group as those who monitor democratic institutions. The above fact that 55.1 per cent join anti-corruption initiatives and 39.0 per cent partake in transparency promotion activities illustrates a strong surveillance of the government performance practice. This is an equally important accountability role in the democratic consolidation since it generates responsive governance pressures and institutional reform pressures. The qualitative results shed light into the manner in which students become what the author terms as, democratic entrepreneurs of accountability, creating and maintaining accountability processes that may otherwise not exist. Their activity during election monitoring (36.7% participation) and budget monitoring (18.4% participation) offer important control mechanisms which support improvements in quality of democracy.

Nonetheless, the multiple regression indicates that the variables including civic education, social capital, and the use of digital platforms are found to be the greatest factors in the participation of a person in the



democracies. This result suggests significant implications on development of democratic engagement and its promotion. This result: namely, that exposure to civic education emerges as the best predictor of democratic participation ($r = .34, p < .001$), justifies the process of formal and informal civic learning in making democratic citizens. This concurs with the vast bibliography of the importance of civic education as a democratic tool (Gould, Jamieson & Levine, 2023), though it also offers the concrete evidence of the role of civic education in Nigeria. The qualitative results, however, identify an additional form of civic education practice beyond what is found in formal curricula and they include experiential learning in student organizations and in peer networks and involvement in the pragmatic workings of democratic processes. This implies that civic education is to be envisaged in a broader manner as all types of democratic education.

When social capital and network effects are thought of, the substantial contribution of social capital to the prediction of the democratic participation complements the theory of Putnam (2020). The students who have a more advanced organizational affiliation and social networks are more politically active, which implies that affiliational life is an important avenue to democracy. The qualitative results give more information on the functioning of social capital among the students. Democratic capacity building can be enhanced by inter-university networks, student organization partnerships and informal peer networks. Such network effect allows sharing resources, acting in concert, and maintaining a prolonged participation that individual students would not be able to carry out on their own.

Similarly, the existence of digital platforms has been disclosed as a powerful enabler. Here, the perceived value of the use of digital platform (the significant predictive role, $r = .28, p < .01$) demonstrates the revolutionary nature of technology in political participation. Online are not only used to organize, and communicate, but also formulate new forms of political participation which would have been impossible before. The results indicate that information access, network formation, collective action coordination, and accountability monitoring are multiple mechanisms of action of the digital democracy. This is the multi-dimensional effect as to why digital engagement is so successful in predicting overall democratic involvement.

Although the motivation and engagement levels are great, students have great obstacles in the democratic participation. The fact that 48.2 percent address the issue of resource limitation as a key obstruction can show the material aspect of the democratic life. These questions romanticized ideas of citizenship that fail to consider whether there were pre-requisites such as the economy to make political participation possible. Structural inhibitions to student democratic participation are manifested in the institutional constraint that 34.4 percent report as important obstacle and in lack of trust in the system which 36.7 percent report as important barrier. These obstacles are specifically important since they are mostly out of an individual control, and systematic changes are required to deal with them. The qualitative data adds breadth to the research showing how university administrations to some extent can reduce student political activities and how the larger political surroundings contribute to security establishes that restrict the participation of students. Such institutional barriers indicate that the goal of establishing maximum student participation in democracy can be achieved through institutional changes rather than individual motivation.

The resource constraints (48.2% major barrier) and time constraints (41.4% major barrier) displays the practical reality students in the context of a developing country have to face. Quite a lot of students have to combine the study with part-time employment, and they have fewer resources and time on their hands to get into politics. But the study also enlightens the way in which the students find solution to these limitations by resorting to novel methods such as means of digital organizing, resource pooling and collective action. This is an indicator that constraints are factual but can be somewhat alleviated by the implementation of strategic approaches as well as institutional support. The ratings show the perceived

effectivity: in which areas democratic participation of the students is most effective. This conclusion can be made based on the fact that students perceive themselves to have the best potential to increase civic awareness (Mean = 4.18) and foster democratic culture (Mean = 3.99), thus their main contribution could be tied to the area of democratic socialization and not a practical difference in policy. The high rated level of perceived outcome as an effective promoter of democratic culture has been corroborated with the qualitative fact that students believe there is a need to protect democratic values. Its role is especially significant in the situations where democratic institutions are not fully established and democratic norms from these cases should be strengthened. The success of the action of civic awareness raising is multiplier, since, having increased the level of political awareness among students, we can hope that they will sustain a high degree of participation in the future. This implies that student democratic participation is beneficial and would have both short term and long term impacts on the growth of democracy.

Lastly, the difficulties students encounter in converting mobilization into tangible policy outcomes are reflected in the lower perceived effectiveness in policy change (Mean = 3.37). This research emphasizes how crucial it is to establish official channels for student participation in policymaking processes as opposed to depending only on unofficial pressure. Nonetheless, the 2023 election case study shows that, with sustained and well-coordinated efforts, students can significantly influence election results and governance procedures. This implies that strategic approaches and advantageous political environments may be necessary for policy change to be effective.

Conclusions

With empirical support for the substantial contributions of educated youth to the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria, this thorough study has explored the diverse role that students play in bolstering democracy and good governance. The results show that students are important democratic actors through a variety of channels, including civic engagement, digital activism, electoral participation, and governance accountability systems. The study reveals a number of important conclusions that improve our knowledge of student participation in democracy:

1. Students demonstrate exceptional levels of democratic participation, with 82.1% registered to vote and 77.3% actually voting, significantly exceeding national averages. This engagement extends beyond electoral participation to encompass diverse forms of civic activity, advocacy, and accountability mechanisms.
2. Students are at the forefront of digital democracy, with 68.9% participating in social media campaigns and 48.2% consuming political content daily. Digital platforms have become primary spaces for student political engagement, enabling new forms of organization, mobilization, and sustained activism.
3. Civic education exposure, social capital development, and digital platform usage emerge as the strongest predictors of democratic participation. These findings provide clear targets for interventions aimed at enhancing student democratic engagement.
4. Despite high motivation levels, students face substantial barriers including resource constraints (48.2%), institutional restrictions (34.4%), and lack of trust in political systems (36.7%). These structural barriers require systematic attention to maximize student contributions to democracy.
5. Students demonstrate significant impact on governance through accountability activities, with 55.1% participating in anti-corruption campaigns and 39.0% engaging in transparency advocacy. Their role as democratic watchdogs contributes to institutional accountability and governance quality.



However, this paper shows that students are also the crucial source of democratizing and good governance. They have high rates of activitarianism, excellent use of digital technologies, and their adherence to accountability systems makes them key players towards democratic consolidation. Nevertheless, to bring to full fruition the potential of student democratic participation it must be acknowledged that structural obstacles must be dealt with, institutional support boosted, and formal channels of student contribution to the process of governance built. The results indicate investing in student democratic participation not only means getting young people to take part in politics but it also means that one is establishing the future of lasting democratic governance. Students have particular resources to offer to democratic processes: energy, idealism, technological expertise and relatively few stakes in the status quo. This aspect makes them ardent champions of accountability and democratic change.

With Nigeria and other African nations on their winding ways towards democracy, the educated youth will play a very important role in this process by being actively involved. The role of the policymakers, educators and heads of civil societies is to develop a better environment where student democracy can be cultured and also given a positive direction. This does not only need the removal of barriers, but also entails the strengthening of student participation by means of available resources, institutions and possibilities to make meaningful participation. The results of the research offer a guide about how students can be made more active participants in a democracy: and this is through reinforcing the civic education, student associations, enhance digitisation, deal with resource shortages, and establish formal processes of involving students in decision-making.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are made for different stakeholders based on the study's findings in order to improve students' contributions to good governance and the strengthening of democracy:

1. Universities should integrate mandatory civic education courses that combine theoretical knowledge with practical engagement opportunities.
2. Institutions should implement genuine student participation in university governance structures to provide practical democratic decision-making experience.
3. Government should establish formal student advisory councils at local, state, and federal levels to provide regular input on policies affecting young people.
4. Government should invest in digital infrastructure that enables widespread internet access and digital participation, particularly in rural areas.
5. Civil society organizations should develop formal partnerships with universities to provide students with opportunities for practical engagement in governance and advocacy work.
6. CSOs should create mentorship programs connecting experienced civil society leaders with student activists to provide guidance and support.
7. International partners should develop and fund programs specifically focused on enhancing student democratic participation and civic engagement.
8. Development partners should support initiatives that increase student access to digital technologies and platforms for democratic participation.



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