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Research Article

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH: PERCEPTION ANALYSIS

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Article info	Abstract
	Youth is the epitome of a creative force. As a dynamic source of innovation, they have participated, contributed, and even catalyzed essential changes in political systems, power-sharing dynamics and history. Youths have reshaped the democratic trajectory of Bangladesh from 1952 to the July 2024 revolution, demonstrating an indomitable spirit of sacrifice. But unfortunately, a significant portion of the youth are detached from the political process. As voting is widely considered the most important form of political participation, this study was carried out to analyze the perception of youths about the electoral process in Bangladesh and identify the factors that trigger their disengagement. The study was conducted in Sylhet City Corporation among 471 participants from diverse backgrounds. A convergent parallel mixed-methods study design was used in this study to collect, analyse and interpret quantitative and qualitative data. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data, which were analysed using SPSS and content analysis. The results show that 50.3% of respondents consider the existing electoral process flawed, and 58.8% believe that the existing electoral process does not reflect the demands of the youth. The study suggests that to ensure youth engagement, the administration and the election commission must play a neutral role. Moreover, credible candidates must be nominated, and a peaceful environment should be ensured at the polling centers to motivate youths to participate in the electoral process.

Introduction

The population of Bangladesh has reached almost 166 million (BBS, 2022), where 25.13% are in the age group 20-34 years. According to the youth policy of Bangladesh 2017, youths are those between the ages of 18 and 35. Despite being a populous country in the world, Bangladesh's economy is showing signs of acceleration for the substantial working generations who are actively contributing to the economy. Youths have reshaped the democratic trajectory of Bangladesh from 1952 to the July 2024 revolution. It is expected that youths should be involved in policymaking and use their intellect and knowledge for national development. But their representation in national and local government elections is lower than in other Asian countries.

Political parties are still a vital barrier to youth participation in decision-making through their control over the submission of the lists of candidates (Msuya and Kariuki, 2021). Unfortunately, the political parties did not understand the youth's psychology and expectations, pushing the young generation to abstain from political participation. The initiatives to engage young people in the development process are still negligible. Sometimes, they participate in the political decision-making process, but the final decisions are made by senior politicians (New Age, 2019).

Apart from that, young people have bitter experiences of voter fraud. Following the introduction of the caretaker government system, Bangladesh experienced a significant shift in its electoral system. All the national elections held under the caretaker government were free, fair, and credible to the national and international communities. Bangladesh witnessed an authoritarian shift over the last decade (Rabbee, 2019; Assadulla and Savoia, 2018). The country was classified as a hybrid regime and ranked 76th on the Democracy Index 2022 reported by the EIU. In elections under a partisan government, most of the voters failed to cast their votes successfully at the polling station. Several observers alleged that the ruling party won the last two elections with the help of the partisan administration. The election commission failed to create a free and fair electoral environment for the youth and women. Despite the thin voter presence, the high voter turnout questions the credibility of these elections.

The participation of voters in the electoral process is declining (Ahmed, 2021). Bangladesh's quality of democracy and voter participation, especially among youth, have been questioned globally (Tamanna, 2018; Jahan, 2014; and Friedman, 2015). Many voters are discouraged from going to the polling station, fearing violence. Suppressing the leaders and supporters of the opposition parties and restricting people's right to protest smacks of an undemocratic culture. Now the electoral system seems to be 'ornamental' to the voters, which is unfortunately tarnishing the country's image. Youths' apathy towards the electoral process is jeopardizing the future of democracy (Tamanna, 2018).

As voting is widely considered the most important form of political participation, this study was carried out to analyze the perception of youths about the electoral process in Bangladesh and identify the factors that trigger their disengagement.

Materials and Methods:

Study area and pre-testing

This study engaged the population of different professionals from Sylhet City Corporation. A preliminary (pilot) visit to the study area was conducted at the outset of the survey to better understand the population and their characteristics. The purposes of the pre-testing were to check interview time, difficulty level of the questions, and questions' wording, i.e., if the questions were easily understandable or if there were any ambiguities, how the interviewees were responding to each question etc. thus, based on the pre-testing results, few questions were modified.

Data Collection and Analysis

A convergent parallel mixed-methods study design was used in this study to collect, analyse and interpret quantitative and qualitative data. Using mixed methods ensures data priority and implementation (Molina-Azorin, 2016) of data properly, which helps to bring real findings open for all. Participants in the study came from diverse backgrounds, including government and non-government professionals, businessmen, labourers, homemakers, hawkers, drivers, rickshaw pullers, unemployed individuals, etc.

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data. A 5-point Likert scale was used to collect quantitative data, and qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions. A sample of 500 respondents was selected for this study using purposive sampling, of which 29 responses were discarded due to incomplete information. Purposive sampling, which is defined as the intentional selection of specific units (such as individuals, cases, or events) based on their relevance to the research question, enables the researchers to gain deep insights into complex phenomena (Tajik et al., 2024). The collected data was analysed using SPSS and content analysis. Finally, the major findings were presented using tables and graphs.

Results and Discussion

Demographic data:

The mean age distribution of the study is 28.98, and the highest respondent is 9.8% from the age group of twenty-six out of 471 respondents (Table 1). On the other hand, Figure 1 shows that 36.3% of respondents graduated, the highest percentage, and 29.5% passed SSC. In relation to demographic data, Table 2 shows that a substantial number of respondents (34.8%) are engaged in business, and 19.7% of respondents are laborers. Tables 2 and 3 signify that a vast number of well-educated youths are involved in the entrepreneurial profession, which reflects that the job market of Bangladesh is insignificant compared to the literacy rate. According to Table 3, 84.3% of respondents are male and 15.7% of respondents are female.

Table 1. Distribution of age of the respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
21.0	2	.4	.4	.4
22.0	17	3.6	3.6	4.0
23.0	16	3.4	3.4	7.4
24.0	28	5.9	5.9	13.4
25.0	39	8.3	8.3	21.7
26.0	46	9.8	9.8	31.4
27.0	34	7.2	7.2	38.6
28.0	46	9.8	9.8	48.4
29.0	32	6.8	6.8	55.2
30.0	35	7.4	7.4	62.6
31.0	28	5.9	5.9	68.6
32.0	37	7.9	7.9	76.4
33.0	28	5.9	5.9	82.4
34.0	43	9.1	9.1	91.5
35.0	40	8.5	8.5	100.0
Total	471	100.0	100.0	
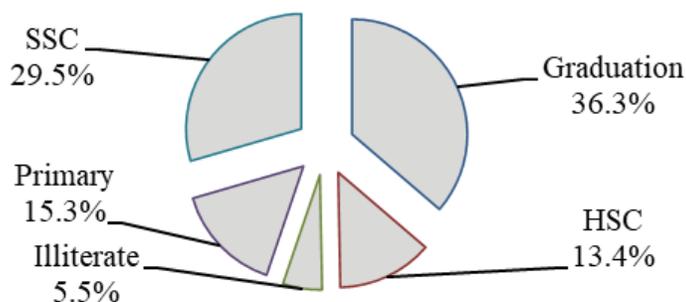
Figure 1. Distribution of Education of the Respondents.

Table 2. Distribution of professions of the Respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Business	164	34.8	34.8	34.8
Government Job	31	6.6	6.6	41.4
Housewife	14	3.0	3.0	44.4
Labor	93	19.7	19.7	64.1
Other	5	1.1	1.1	65.2
Private Job	88	18.7	18.7	83.9
Student	57	12.1	12.1	96.0
Unemployed	19	4.0	4.0	100.0
Total	471	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: Distribution of gender of the respondents

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Female	74	15.7	15.7	15.7
Male	397	84.3	84.3	100.0
Total	471	100.0	100.0	

Insight of youth about electoral participation:

Figure 2 shows that 93.6% of respondents have taken part in the electoral process 1-5 times till now, and only 4.7% have participated 6-10 times in the electoral process, which truly reflects their age group.
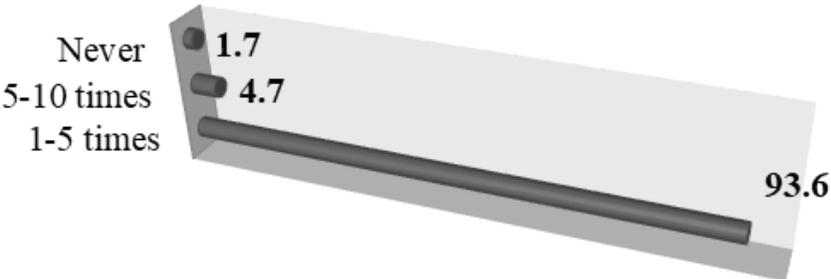
Figure 2. How many times have you participated in the poll so far?

According to Chart 3, 12.1% of respondents have admitted to receiving money from the candidate for votes. Though the percentage is negligible, the reality is different. Now the candidates use various channels to transfer funds for buying votes. Receivers of that money change their voting preferences for personal or financial benefits. Politicians employ unemployed youths and students to intimidate voters before an election or to buy votes on behalf of a particular candidate (Siddiky, 2022). A study conducted by TIB (2024) found that in the national election, some candidates of the ruling party spent a huge amount of money to secure their votes and for other illegal activities in some constituencies.
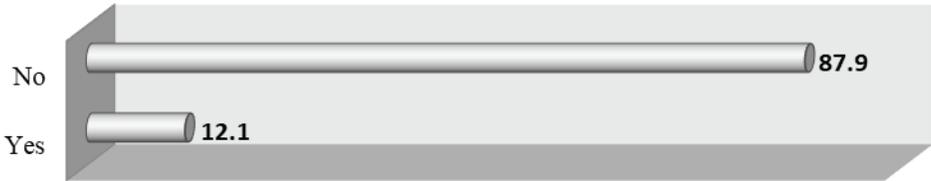

Figure 3. Have you ever transacted money to vote for a particular candidate in an election?

Figure 4 shows that the respondents mostly look for honesty (50.7%) and social acceptance (27.6%) in a candidate. They do not take into consideration a candidate's political experience or engagement. They expect an educated, socially well-recognized, and honest candidate. However, such expectations are not universal and change from time to time. The demands of youths in the US presidential election were not like their expectations in 2000. A study conducted by Tuft University by Circle (2015) revealed that in the 2008 presidential election, youths aspired for a candidate who would 'bring change,' but in 2012 their choice shifted to someone who would give them an 'enlightened future.' A study by Pew (2015) research found that 56% of young people want to choose someone who has innovative ideas and unique approaches (PRC, 2015). At present, 40% of voters in Bangladesh are young people who have lost their enthusiasm, as the candidates or the political parties do not reflect their aspirations, and the state or civil society is reluctant to work for their demands.
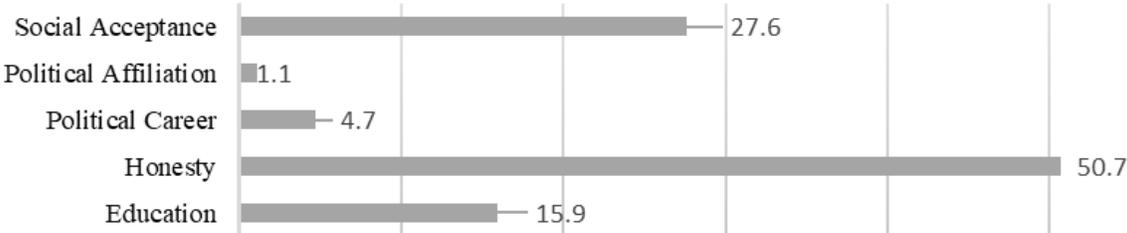

Figure 4. What are the qualities that you look for in a candidate?

Table 4 shows that 16.8% of respondents failed to cast their vote after arriving at the polling station. Notwithstanding, the response is low, but unexpected in the electoral field, and the actual image is different. TIB (2024) found in their study that voters were forced to vote for a particular electoral party in 55.1% of seats; grabbing booths, publicly sealing ballots, and casting fake votes took place in 51% of seats; voters were threatened and not allowed to enter polling stations in 49% of seats; fraud in vote counting was reported in 42.9% of seats; and purchase of votes by paying cash, conveyance, and supplying food happened in 38.8% of seats.

According to Table 5, the local election is more acceptable to the respondents (56.9%) than the national election (29.9%). On the other hand, the elections are not credible to 13.2% of respondents. The local election in Bangladesh had a glorified history before the introduction of symbols for the political parties. These symbols are believed to have significantly increased violence, muscle power, and spending money in local elections. The above response is the consequence of the previous local elections.

Table 4 Have you ever failed to vote at the polling station?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	79	16.8	16.8	16.8
No	392	83.2	83.2	100.0
Total	471	100.0	100.0	

Table 5 Which election seems more acceptable to you?

|	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
National	141	29.9	29.9	29.9
Local	268	56.9	56.9	86.8
None	62	13.2	13.2	100.0
Total	471	100.0	100.0	

Table 6 represents the perception of the local election environment. About 58.4% of respondents believe the environment of the local government poll is better than the national election, and 13.4% think neither of the electoral environments is good. This is consistent with the findings of the previous table (Table 5).

Table 6 In which elections do you think the electoral environment is good?

|	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
National	133	28.2	28.2	28.2
Local	275	58.4	58.4	86.6
None	63	13.4	13.4	100.0
Total	471	100.0	100.0	

The respondents were asked about their level of interest in casting votes. According to Figure 5, 27.6% of respondents are fairly interested in casting a vote, while 26.8% are moderately interested. Surprisingly, 49.7% of respondents chose the options from 'very poor' to 'moderate.' The young people are less likely to vote in polls than older people (UNDP, 2023; UNDP, 2024; IPU, 2022). This is a globally increasing trend. On the other hand, the rate of voter turnout in Bangladesh has drastically decreased. According to the Bangladesh Election Commission, mentioned in Siddiky (2022), voter turnout was 40% in the 2024 election,

which reached 80% in the 2008 election. The diplomatic sources in Dhaka said the voter turnout was only 20%. The primary and secondary studies are completely rational with the result about the low participation of youth in the election, not only in Bangladesh but also as the actual global picture. For example, a study conducted by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh (2023), found that 89.4% of youth (18-35) are included in the voter list, but 53.8% of them had never voted in the national election, and 46% never cast their vote in the local election.
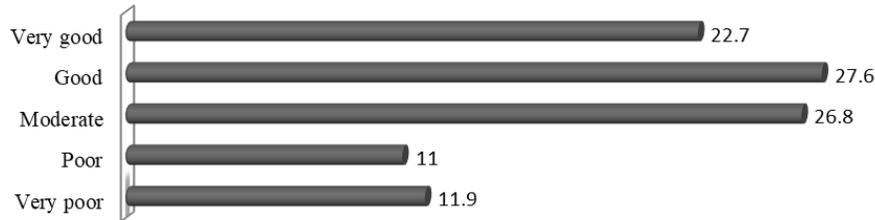

Figure 5. How are young people interested in voting in the election?

Figure 6 shows that 42.5% of respondents think the candidates never engaged the youths in the electoral process, while 37.6% think this happened sometimes. To ensure the development of youth, every government has invested in health, education, and sports without hearing their voices. Authorities rarely worked to ensure youth civic and political engagement. When youth feel that they are actively involved in decision-making and their concerns are taken seriously by government officials, they feel more enthusiastic and energetic, which inspires them to work more for society (NDI, 2024). This develops self-esteem and a sense of empowerment, which contributes to social well-being and benefits society by raising awareness about challenges and commitment to finding solutions (OECD, 2024).
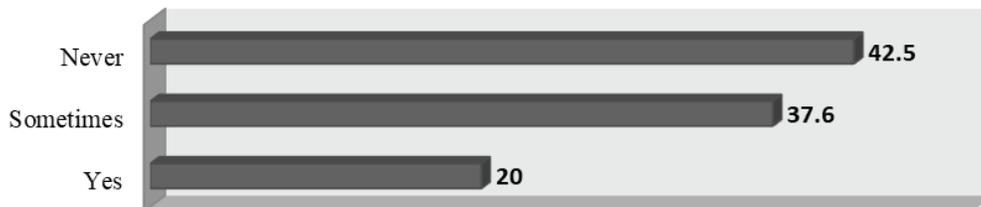

Figure 6. Have the candidates taken any initiatives to engage the youth electoral process?

According to Figure 7, 50.3% of respondents consider the existing electoral process flawed. On the other hand, 21.2% think the process is fair. According to the Economic Intelligence Unit, a flawed democratic system, known as a hybrid regime, exists in Bangladesh (EIU, 2023), which represents defective democracy or electoral authoritarianism (Schmotz, 2019). According to EIU, substantial irregularities often occur in the elections of hybrid regime states, which prevent them from being free and fair. Bangladesh's electoral system for the last two decades bears testimony to its transformation to a hybrid regime (Riaz, 2019).
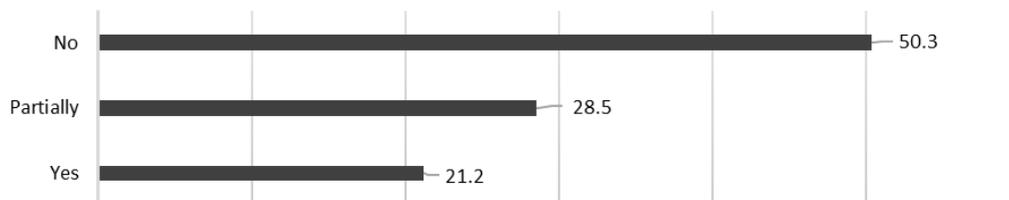

Figure 7. Do you think the existing electoral process in the country is correct?

Figure 8 shows that 58.8% of respondents believe that the existing electoral process does not reflect the demands of the youth. Only 14.6% of respondents have faith in the present electoral process. Bangladesh held an ornamental election by the commission to a government where manipulation of the vote, voters, law, and electoral corruption took place regularly and easily (TIB, 2024). No government or political parties took any substantial initiatives that reflected the opinion of the youth or considered their demand. The low turnout of the young voters shows their reluctance to participate in the electoral process, as they are not treated significantly, and no authority even counts their judgment or their outlook concerning the future of the country.
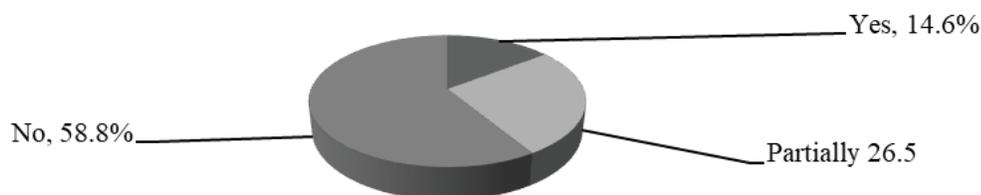
Figure 8. Do you believe the current electoral process reflects the democratic demands of youth?

Figure 9 depicts that neutral administration (48%), and election commission (36.3%) are important for free and fair elections. In the Constitution of Bangladesh, the Election Commission has been empowered to work independently for holding fair elections. Regrettably, the election commission has faced charges of nepotism. Sometimes, the election commission depends on the government for financial matters and law enforcement (Rahman, 2006). This often jeopardizes its independence. Furthermore, the election commission relies on the administration to perform its functions. The election commission and the administration are inextricably intertwined in the electoral process. It is widely acknowledged that administration can manipulate elections. When the administration acts directly under a dictator or a hybrid regime without constitutional checks and balances, manipulation of the vote is normal (Siddiky, 2022). TIB surveyed in 2024 and reported that administration and law enforcement agencies played inactive roles to prevent violations of electoral rules, laws, order, and irregularities in 85.7% of the fifty constituencies in the 2024 election. They declared the election unfair and non-inclusive. The young people have lost interest in participating in the election due to such anomalies. They do not trust the political democratic institutions, which have significantly decreased the voter turnout (UNDP, 2024).
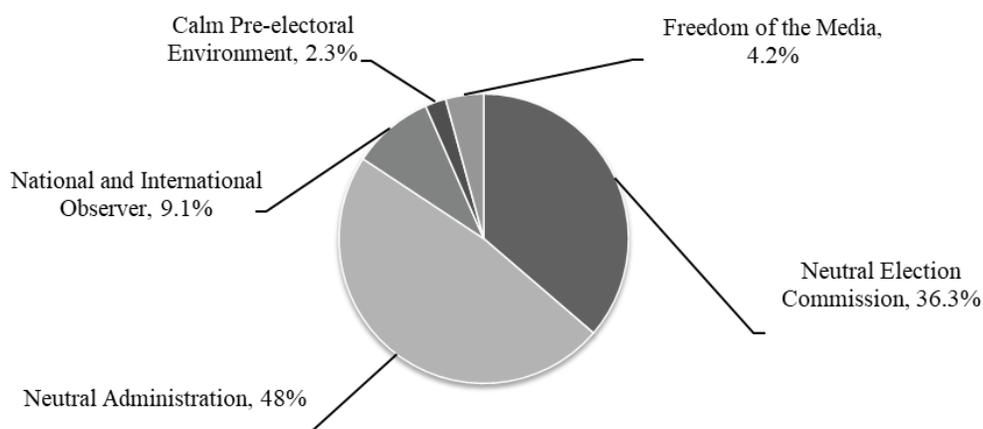
Figure 9. Which is important for holding a free and fair election?

Conclusion and recommendations

Political participation is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance. Barriers to youth participation in politics need to be identified. The study found that strong political commitment can encourage youth participation in politics. To achieve this, the government should arrange programs that reflect the youths' aspirations and identify their needs. The study recommends the following suggestions to ensure youth participation:

- A neutral election commission needs to be formed.

- Transparency and accountability need to be restored in administration.

- Political parties should include the demands of the youth in their election manifesto.

- Youths need to be involved in the political decision-making process.

- Political parties should select their candidates based on acceptable criteria like honesty, education, and social acceptance, which will attract the young generation to participate in the electoral system.

- Voters' safety should be ensured at polling centers to ensure they can cast votes without obstructions.

Acknowledgement

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