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Youth Political Disengagement: Explaining Low Electoral Participation among First-Time Eligible Voters in Pakistan

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Abstract
The political landscape in Pakistan is relatively young, as over 60 percent of the nation's population is below the age of 30 and the number of registered voters aged between 18 and 29 are in excess of 44 million. However, first-time eligible voters have typically voted at lower rates than the national average, suggesting a troubling pattern of low turnout and a lack of health in the nation's democratic project. This article explores why despite the high visibility of political discussion on social media and among young Pakistanis who are actively participating in informal political discussions, there is a lack of engagement with formal electoral participation. Based on election-commission data, survey research by Gallup Pakistan and the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT), and a wealth of recent scholarship in Pakistan around political trust and civic engagement, the article proposes that disengagement should be interpreted not as apathy, but as a rational reaction to a combination of structural, institutional, and psychological challenges: deep-rooted political mistrust and cynicism, low levels of civic and political education, the decline of student unions, dynastic and patronage-based political parties, socio-economic insecurity, and for some, a real concern about violence during election periods. It also examines a counter-narrative that has emerged in the Pakistani political discourse, whereby many young Pakistanis are not abandoning politics but are channeling their energies into different forms of civic engagement – including digital campaigns, protest action and informal political participation – instead of the ballot box. The article concludes by discussing the implications of youth disengagement on the legitimacy of the formal political system in Pakistan and presents policy directions such as reform of civic-education, reinvigorating student unions and engagement with young people as part of electoral outreach that could help bridge the divide between youth and the formal political system.
Keywords: youth political participation, voter turnout, Pakistan, political disengagement, civic education, first-time voters, political trust

Introduction
Indeed, democracy relies, more or less literally, on people coming to the polls. A high rate of non-voting among a nation's youngest population creates an issue of legitimacy in the democratic process, even if the intention of the nation's leadership was never to seek to exclude that age group from the process. This tension is very starkly demonstrated in Pakistan. The country has one of the youngest populations on earth, containing about 36 million young people

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aged 15-24, along with 15 million younger than 15, which account for nearly sixty percent of the nation's population (Zikria, 2020). This demographic fact should make Pakistani youth a key voting bloc in South Asia, in theory. But in practice, they have been at best an inconsistent relationship with the ballot box.

The youth participation in general elections in Pakistan has varied widely in the last 20 years. During the general election 2007, approximately half of the people aged 18–29 years voted and in the election of 2013, about one third of the eligible voters, around 36%, cast their votes, which the commentators associated with growing disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the political system which is widely believed to be corrupt and unresponsive (Pakistan Today, 2023). Gallup Pakistan's exit-poll data cited by PILDAT (2025) shows that youth participation increased a little bit in 2018, with an estimated turnout of 37 percent, and then in 2024 general elections, there was a historic turnout of 48 percent. What should be noted here is that figure of 2024, which nearly closed the longstanding gap between youth turnout and overall turnout that was as large as twenty-nine percentage points in 2013 (PILDAT, 2025). Despite the increased number of voters (nearly six million) due to the addition of many young voters to voter rolls since the last election, overall national turnout declined from 52.1 percent in 2018 to 47.6 percent in 2024 (Asian Network for Free Elections [ANFREL], 2024). It does not, in other words, depict a straightforward, linear decrease. A portrait of under-performance on a regular basis, compared to the numbers of young people, with occasional moments of real mobilisation.

The focus of this article is on eligible voters who are turning eighteen and casting their first vote – or deciding not to vote for the first time. This group differs from "youth" as a whole because they have no precedent to vote; it is this first one to two elections they are allowed to vote in that, according to political scientists, is formative, determining whether they will become a lifelong voter, or easily opt out of voting (Verba et al., 1995). The reasons why so many voters failed to vote in the first election are not just for this election, but for the next three decades, as the voters of the age of 18 are the electorate of the age of twenty one years old.

We continue in this article as follows. It first places the discussion in the context of some of the theories relevant to political participation. It then takes a retrospective look at the political involvement of youth in Pakistan, ranging from the lively student politics of the 1960s and 1970s to the ban on student unions in 1984 and the current situation of youth. It reviews the available evidence on the turnout of the youth and first-time voters and then moves on to a comprehensive examination of the structural, institutional and psychological factors that have been identified in recent scholarship in Pakistan for disengagement. It then discusses an important counter-argument: that much of what is perceived as disengagement is actually engagement that has been shifted in some way from traditional electoral processes. The consequences and policy suggestions are discussed at the end of the article.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Classical Models of Political Participation

Theories of youth disengagement can be traced back to three general theoretical streams, each of which has some applicability to the Pakistani context. The first is the rational choice tradition, which sees voting as a cost benefit analysis: citizens only vote if costs of registering, travelling to polling station, and obtaining information to make an informed choice before going to vote are outweighed by the expected benefit of their vote (depending on the likelihood that it will make a difference). As part of this, low youth voting is not irrational apathy, but a

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reasonable reaction to a low likelihood of a youth vote having any impact on a vote's outcome, particularly in settings of contested election results or perceived predetermined outcomes.

The second tradition is the civic voluntarism model proposed by Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) that participation is driven by three resources: time, money, and civic skills, which are frequently acquired through involvement in school, work, religious institutions, or voluntary groups. Where these institutions are weak, absent, or actively discouraged, as perhaps they have been in Pakistan since the 1980s with students' unions, young people never learn to build their organisational skills and confidence, which are crucial in helping them participate in elections later in life.

The third tradition is that of Putnam (2000), who argues that a decline in civic and political engagement is tied to a weakening of associational life, including unions, neighborhood clubs and groups. Putnam's argument was formulated in the context of the American experience, but subsequent scholars studying the decline of associational density in other democratic countries have found that the phenomenon is identical to the Pakistani situation, where formal student political organisations are almost nonexistent since 1984, and which is precisely what Putnam's theory would expect to see in a country where they do not exist. The third and latest line of thought, led by Norris (2002), complicates this picture by suggesting that in both advanced and developing democracies political activity has not been merely diminished but has become more varied: citizens, and young citizens in particular, are more likely to direct their political energies towards protest, consumer action and digital mobilisation than towards traditional party politics and voting. The “diversification” thesis is of immediate interest to Pakistan, and as will be elaborated upon in the following sections, high levels of social media political engagement go hand in hand with a historically low voter turnout.

Pakistani Scholarship on Youth Disengagement

A recent research agenda in Pakistan has started to challenge these models with local data, and these elements largely coalesce around political distrust, weak civic education, and structural exclusion as key explanatory factors. A study of university students by Mahmood et al. (2025) found that feelings of political dishonesty, incompetence and distrust were significant predictors of political apathy, while some measures of civic participation mediated that relationship, that is, feelings of distrust were less likely to lead to political apathy in young people who had some form of civic participation. Using focus group discussions with respondents aged between eighteen and thirty-five years, Asif et al. (2026) identified the following as the main reasons for disengagement – lack of political trust, elite capture of political system, instability of the government, weak civic education and socio-economic hardship and traced the roots of these drivers back to the ban on student unions in 1984 and the subsequent entrenchment of dynastic politics. In contrast, in a behaviouralist analysis, Asghar et al. 2026 make a more nuanced conclusion about the youth of Pakistan: they exhibit a low level of institutional trust, but are politically aware, albeit not necessarily engaged in institutional means of political expression, but rather in social media.

Overall, this body of literature points to the fact that youth disengagement in Pakistan is a multi-faceted phenomenon and does not have a single reason. It is more clearly an outcome of the interaction of structural factors, low quality civic institutions and rational reactions to a political system which many young citizens do not find responsive to them. These dynamics are explored in more depth in the sections that follow, starting with the historical context that gave rise to them.

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Historical Context: From Student Vanguard to Institutional Vacuum

Political disenchantment among the youth is a relatively new phenomenon in the context of the Pakistani history. Students and youth activists were the most important political players in the country in the decades after independence, particularly during the 1960s, when they were instrumental in the removal of President Ayub Khan's regime in 1968 and 1969. At places like University of Karachi, student unions were the breeding grounds for national leaders, where the students learned skills in organising, debating and were the first to speak out in the public sphere as politicians.

That all changed in 1984 when student unions were banned en masse throughout the country by General Zia-ul-Haq's government, a move noted in the historiography of youth politics by scholars as the most significant institutional break in this history (Afzal & Chaudhry as cited in the academic literature on Pakistani youth and politics). In subsequent decades, the ban was temporarily and partially lifted in some universities, but in most institutions of learning today formal student political organization, although permitted, is restricted by administrators who fear the unrest that might otherwise reign on the campus. As recent scholarship on the disengagement of 'politically engaged' students in Pakistan has suggested, a patronizing and risk-taking approach is now often implicit in students' perceptions of their civic involvement, and even more so in the perceptions of those who interact with them.

Concurrently, within the major parties, the dynastic and patronage politics have been consolidated over the corresponding period, which is the institutional vacuum that is overlaid. The void left after 1984 by student unions was increasingly dominated by succession within families in the parties and the informal patron-client networks that were emerging, which prioritise loyalty and connections over grassroots mobilisation. In the qualitative literature on youth political attitudes in Pakistan, a sense of a lack of ownership over the political process is reoccurring, as it is for voters for the first time today.Being a first-time voter today can feel less like participating in a movement, and more like being asked to rubberstamp decisions made elsewhere—a sentiment that is repeated throughout the qualitative literature on youth political attitudes in Pakistan.

Current Trends: What the Turnout Data Show

There are a number of limitations in the available quantitative evidence on youth and first-time-voter turnout in Pakistan. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) does not routinely publish figures on this turnout, and most of what is known comes from post-election exit polling carried out by organisations like Gallup Pakistan as well as turnout analysis produced by election-monitoring entities like the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN). This is consistent evidence of a steady, albeit shrinking, deficit in youth participation compared to the national average, and a steady volatility from election to election.

PILDAT's (2025) analysis of Gallup Pakistan exit-poll data reveals that between the last three general elections, youth turnout has shifted as follows: in 1993 there was only five percentage points difference between the youth turnout and the overall turnout; in 2013, there was a 29 per cent gap between youth and overall turnout; in 2018, there was only about 15 per cent difference between the youth turnout and overall turnout; and in 2024, youth turnout was almost equal to the overall turnout, with age 18-24 achieving an estimated 48 per cent turnout compared to the overall turnout of 47.6 per cent. The convergence of 2024 is of unprecedented nature and is largely said to be the result of sustained voter-education drives that by the end of 2022 included over four hundred voter-awareness sessions at schools, colleges and universities, and even

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started to engage in direct voter awareness sessions with first-time voters through the YouTubers and social media influencers, as part of the ECP's own voter-engagement initiative, Strengthening Voter Engagement and Electoral Process (SVEEP) (Express Tribune, 2022).

The 2024 election at the same time is a reminder of how quickly other factors can undo gains. National turnout was less in 2024 despite the increase in youth turnout which is due in part to a sharp increase in voter roll from 2018 to 2024, which mechanically pushes turnout down as a percentage even with more youth voters; and in part to the harsh winter weather, security concerns in KPK and Balochistan Province, and in part to the general uncertainty about the conduct of the election itself (ANFREL, 2024). Another complicating factor is gender: while the turnout of males has increased from 46.9 percent in 2018 to 48.9 percent in 2024, the turnout of females has decreased from 46.9 percent in 2018 to 41.3 percent in 2024, and this gap is likely to disproportionately impact young women, particularly given the ongoing restrictions on their mobility and independent decision-making in many households.

The overall message of the data is that the disengagement of youth in Pakistan is not fixed and unchangeable. Efforts to encourage young people to vote are effective, as are appeals to the importance of an election, and convenience on election day. But the underlying baseline — a youth electorate that in most election cycles since 1993 has been less inclined than the national average to cast votes — suggests structural, not simply situational, issues, as explored in greater detail in the next section.

Explaining the Gap: Structural, Institutional, and Psychological Drivers

Political Distrust and Cynicism

A settled view that politicians are unscrupulous, ineffectual or a combination of both, and that formal political engagement thus yields few results is the explanation that has emerged most consistently from recent Pakistani studies and is what a number of authors have called political cynicism. A pathway where individuals' perceptions of political dishonesty and incompetence lead to political apathy has been directly supported in university students by Mahmood et al. (2025), who found that these perceptions partially mediate the relationship between civic engagement and political apathy. The World Anti Extremism Network (2026) places this cynicism in the context of repeated failure to deliver on election promises, weak government and an impression that un-elected institutions influence how things turn out, thereby undermining the belief among young citizens that their actions at the ballot box make a difference.

It is not just that young people are poorly informed, or lack the civic sense. Instruments have shown that the youth in the Pakistani sample were not very trustful of institutions, but were politically aware and involved in political activities in an informal way, indicating that low level of trust is an accurate picture of political conditions and not ignorance. (Asghar et al., 2026). In this respect, low turnout is not apathy, or opposition, but rather withdrawal of consent from a system that is deemed to be unresponsive.

Weak Civic and Political Education

The other recurring theme is the lack of a robust civic and political education in the formal schools of Pakistan. Bukhari and others' critical examination of curriculum and pedagogy revealed that while political education is formally part of the Pakistani school curriculum, this education is taught in small doses with limited scope, independent from students' political surroundings, and does not adequately enable them to learn how to exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens. This study also revealed that the influence of civic knowledge and electoral participation among Pakistan's youth is not always associated with one another; a youth

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can be very knowledgeable about politics and social media but almost be oblivious to voter registration, constituency boundaries, and how to actually cast votes.

The Legacy of the Student-Union Ban

The student unions were banned in 1984, as the result of which the country's most important training ground for youth leaders was eliminated. Explicitly connecting this ban to the longer-term growth of disengagement, Asif et al. (2026) suggest that a vacuum was filled by dynastic party structures which do not give young people any meaningful stake in political outcomes. An associated qualitative study of politically engaged youth revealed that while apathy is not a key problem, it was found that there are other structural and psychological barriers to political participation such as concerns about safety, high workloads and lack of trust in political institutions, and that when youth encounter these challenges, no evidence was found that civic education programmes offered through NGOs and communities alone are able to meaningfully reduce them.

Socio-Economic Precarity

As the civic voluntarism model suggests, political participation is a matter of time and resources, and that's something that many young Pakistanis lack. In the focus-groups study conducted by Asif et al. (2026), socio-economic hardship was identified as one of the major factors impacting disengagement, which is supported by a wider pattern of socio-economic hardship being a contributing factor in compounding the impact of each of these barriers: youth who are juggling work, study and family responsibilities under high inflation and economic uncertainty have relatively limited time to dedicate to registration, keep track of campaign coverage, and travel to their polling station on election day, especially if they live in rural areas where polling stations may be further away.

Safety, Security, and Logistical Barriers

Security issues are another often overlooked obstacle. The analysis by FAFEN of the 2024 election explicitly acknowledges the factors of fears of violence and terrorism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, along with harsh winter conditions that resulted in a suppression of the turnout in the year 2024 (ANFREL, 2024). For a young first-time voter who has no tradition of voting and who may not have many friends who are also voters, the security concerns, or the weather, are more likely to tip the balance in favour of abstention, than with an older voter who may have a long tradition of voting and have a lot of voters who come to the polling station with him.

Gender and Intersecting Barriers

While male participation in the 2024 election saw an increase from 2018, female participation decreased, from 46.9 percent to 41.3 percent, reflecting another set of barriers that young women may face. Women's lack of independent mobility, the informal practices of household decision making, which can effectively influence a woman's voting choice by a male relative, and in some constituencies, agreements among elders to exclude women from voting altogether continue to be noted aspects of Pakistani electoral politics. These obstacles can exacerbate the overall youth turnout gap, especially for young women who are voting for the first time, due to their susceptibility to other barriers to voting and the fact that they are less likely to have the resources needed to vote than men.

A Counter-Narrative: Disengagement or Displacement?

But low numbers of young Pakistanis voting is no sign that they have lost interest in politics. However, a strong strand of recent commentary and research challenges the "standard

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diagnosis" of apathetic, distracted, screen-addicted youth, as one commentator in The Friday Times (2026) puts it, which he goes on to dub "highly insulting". The same piece of the commentary is relevant to the current wave of youth mobilisation – as communities of young people came out onto the streets without being prompted by institutions, or incentivized by pay, they organised demonstrations, followed court proceedings live and participated in debate of the constitution – it is clear that what can be interpreted as a lack of interest from the outside is, from the inside, in fact, a demand for the political system to act differently, rather than a withdrawal from engagement.

This reading is broadly in line with empirical findings by Asghar et al. (2026) that Pakistani youth lack trust in the institutions but are politically aware and actively participate in politics via social media and other informal sources. It is also aligned with the findings of international research on the relation between social media and youth political participation that shows that there is a correlation between both in many countries including less established democracies like Pakistan where a significant portion of youth are politically active on social media while there is less positive evidence regarding formal participation indicators like voter turnout.

The difference is important for policy. In turn, if young disengagement is a true lack of interest, it is important to spark interest in civic engagement by engaging in civic education and outreach. If, on the other hand, it signals a rational shift of political attention from a system seen as unresponsive or captured, civic-education campaigns alone will not bridge the turnout gap; what is required is real institutional change that involves giving young people a meaningful voice in the results of the electoral process, as outlined in recommendations below.

Consequences for Pakistani Democracy

Young voter disengagement has repercussions that will impact much more than one election cycle. First, it may lead to the creation of a generation that may become used to not voting, a behavior that has been documented by political scientists to develop in the first few years of voting eligibility (Verba et al., 1995). First-time voters who vote at the lowest turnout rates are more likely to vote again in future elections, but even more likely to continue abstaining.The lower turnout among first-time voters is more likely to persist over the long term.

Secondly, the low youth turnout results in a skewed electorate when it comes to policy preferences: on issues from education funding to climate adaptation to labour-market reform, the preferences of voters under the age of 30 may differ widely from those of older voters. Since young people constitute about sixty percent of the Pakistani population, whose preferences are systematically underrepresented, the risk exists that the policy outcomes may not reflect the country's actual demographic makeup and its future needs.

Third and much more acerbically, continued disengagement invites the suspicion that Pakistani democracy is in question. The voices of youth are missing from the political debates in which they must be included in order to gain their trust, and, in turn, the faith of the broader population; it is not just the faith of any one party or government, but of the political process as a whole. A young electorate that has grown up with a tradition of voting that is merely a formality is a real long-term threat to civilian, constitutional governance in a country where democratic rule has frequently been undermined by military takeovers.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The above evidence indicates that it is unlikely that any one intervention can close the youth turnout gap, because the youth turnout gap is created by multiple, somewhat independent causes. There should thus be a multi-faceted policy response, with a number of complementary aspects.

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First, civic education must be more substantive and substantive than it is in Pakistani schools now, with students being given real-world experience of democratic processes like mock voting, a structured format for debate and practical information about voter registration and the mechanics of voting, and not just civics content alone. Secondly, the establishment of genuine student unions, suitably regulated and effectively supervised to thwart the violence and coercion that prompted the ban in 1984, would go a long way toward re-establishing the organizational training ground that produced Pakistan's most politically able young leaders; this is specifically recommended in recent Pakistani research on youth disengagement, which also advocates for dedicated youth quotas in parliament (Asif et al., 2026).

Third, voter-outreach programmes like the ones successfully implemented by the ECP's SVEEP, such as collaborations with social-media influencers, and the in-person sessions held in schools and colleges, seem to have helped drive the record youth turnout in 2024 and should be expanded and funded continuously — not just as an election-year initiative. Fourth, political parties themselves have a major role to play: if they open their processes to reduce the dynasmatic nature of party selection, and give young party members a credible way to influence the policy agenda, rather than just campaigning for senior party officials, this would directly address the sense of a captured system that is common across the qualitative literature reviewed above. Fifth, targeted measures are required to bridge the gender gap in youth turnout, such as polling stations for women only, mobile voter registration drives and community-based efforts to tackle the informal barriers that deter youth women from casting their ballots independently, to ensure that improvements in overall youth turnout are not disproportionate to young women.

Last but not least, policy makers and civil society groups should be mindful not to equate all forms of disengagement. If the evidence suggests a genuine lack of interest, then awareness campaigns are a suitable strategy; if the evidence suggests, on the other hand, that a considered withdrawal from a system that is seen as not responsive to their contribution is a more lasting one, then institutional reform is more appropriate, in order to regain the confidence of young citizens in believing that their participation can actually have an impact on the results.

Conclusion

Youth political disengagement in Pakistan is not an apathy nor a fixed component of the political culture. In addition to the clear changes in youth turnout, the data reveal a level of real volatility ranging from a youth turnout gap of twenty-nine points in 2013, to almost parity with the national average in 2024; and a persistent level of underperformance compared to the demographic weight of youth. Structural causes include: Pakistani scholarship, political distrust and cynicism, poor civic education, the lingering effect of the ban on student unions in 1984, dynastic party systems, socio-economic insecurity, and security concerns, and these issues are not likely to fade away with the passage of time. Meanwhile, there has been increasing research and commentary questioning the notion that withdrawing from the ballot box equates to withdrawing from politics, as many young Pakistanis are still politically savvy and active on digital and informal platforms, despite not voting. It is possible that bridging the divide between these two types of engagement – formal and informal, formal and digital – will do more to show young people that the formal political system can respond to their care when they care about politics, rather than trying to convince young people to care about politics in the first place, which the evidence suggests is not the case.

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