

Periodic Research

Youth Participation in the Democratic Process

Abstract

This paper examines the nature and extent of political participation of youth. This was examined by assessing their level of participation in voting, party membership, attending election meetings, campaigning for a candidate and taking part in political discussion. As political participation is incomplete without incorporating civic participation into the equation the paper also examines the social dimension of political participation. The study reveals that there are considerable differences in the level of engagement across dimensions of electoral activities among youth. Youth participation in voting is high. Participation in campaign activity remains very much a minority pursuit for youth in Nagaland. As far as attending election meetings and rallies are concerned a substantial number of youth reported attending election meeting. This activity is moderately high as compared to taking part in campaign or party membership.

Keywords: Youth, Elections, Political Participation and Democracy.

Introduction

There are many reasons why a lot of attention is paid to youth and their participation in the democratic process. Among the citizens of any country, the young occupies very important place and plays a vital role in the continuation and strengthening of democracy. They constitute the largest constituency of voters. Among the voting age population worldwide, 49 per cent are between the ages of 20 and 39.¹ However, the young - the youth voters - as a political category has hardly been an issue of political interest and analysis till recent times. Young people, like women, are therefore a politically "excluded majority".² In India it was only during the 2009 Lok Sabha election and in various assembly elections after the Lok Sabha election that there has been increasing interest in the youth vote in India.³

Keeping in mind the potential of youth in becoming key player in electoral politics, the National Youth Policy 2003 has underscored the role of India's youth in political decision-making, and has argued for greater representation of youth in appropriate bodies as well as more extensive youth participation in the design and implementation of programmes.⁴ The international community too has recognized the importance of youth participating in political systems, including through several international conventions and UN resolutions. In line with these commitments, UNDP views youth as a positive force for transformative social change, and aims to help enhance youth political participation.⁵ The UNDP's Youth Strategy (2014–2017) called 'Empowered Youth, Sustainable Future' calls on the young generations to become more involved and more committed in development processes. The Youth Strategy which is titled "Enhanced youth civic engagement and participation in decision-making and political processes and institutions" aims to bolster youth political participation through the promotion of inclusive and effective engagement and participation of youth in planning and decision-making processes and platforms at local, national, regional and global levels that support sustainable development solutions to poverty, inequality and exclusion.⁶ Therefore the survival, consolidation, and advancement of democracy in all states require the support of democratically oriented citizens, including younger generations.⁷ Therefore understanding the democratic behaviour of young people is critical for strengthening the quality of democracy in the future.

Aim of the Study

The sheer size of the youthful population has important political implications. Many scholars, policymakers and other experts have pointed to the critical role young people play in the future democratization and

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consolidation of democratic institutions. The democratic outlook of young people in today's societies is critical for understanding and predicting developments in the political sphere as well as for analyzing a broad array of issues in the larger social and cultural domains.⁸ Indeed the participation of youth in the political process constitutes an investment for a healthy democracy

In the case of Nagaland, there is perhaps little need to argue why one should take an interest in youth who are a powerful electoral demographic and can truly make a difference. They represent an important constituency for electoral mobilization in the state. They constitute more than half (52.92 %) of the voters in Nagaland falling in the age group of 18-35 (State Assembly Election Data, 2008). They are a vital component for building and strengthening democracy in a state that has been besieged by decades of armed conflict and unrest over the Naga people's right to self determination. Against this demographic character the major aim of the paper is to study the political attitudes and behaviours of the youth. Given the deficit of research on youth political engagement in Nagaland, it seems prudent to take a detailed look into the nature and extend of political participation by them.

The literature on citizen participation offers various classifications of the modes through which people get involved in politics. For the study the following forms of political participation have been included as indices to measure young people's degree of participation in electoral activities:

1. Voting
2. Membership in political party
3. Campaigning for a candidate or political party
4. Attending election meetings/rallies
5. Taking part in political discussion with others

Review of Literature

As it is customary before embarking upon an investigation of a problem to look into the available literature on the chosen subject this section highlights specific studies relevant to youth political participation.

According to the 2011 census, of the total population of 1.2 billion, 333 million people are in the age group of 15-29 (28%), where men and women are in the ratio of 4:3. The population in the age group of 15-34 increased from 353 million in 2001 to 430 million in 2011. Current predictions suggest a steady increase in the youth population to 464 million by 2021, making India the world's youngest country.⁹ This makes it all the more necessary to shed light on the democratic behaviour of young people for understanding the political development in a society. The international community has recognized the importance of youth participating in political systems, including through several international conventions and UN resolutions. In line with these commitments, UNDP views youth as a positive force for transformative social change, and aims to help enhance youth political participation (UNDP, 2013).

However, young people's support for democratic principles and values in different democratic society is not on the same degree. In

some society, youth's participation in the political processes remain at the level of dissatisfaction and alienation and in some the youth remains highly disillusioned with operation of politics and skeptical of politicians at the helm.¹⁰ Findings mentioned in 'Youth Civic Engagement',¹¹ a 2016 UN World Youth report, reveal that voter turnout has decreased in all democracies since the 1980s and that the turnout decline is concentrated among youth. Survey results from a sample of 33 countries indicate that close to 44 percent of young adults aged 18-29 years "always vote", compared with almost 60 percent of all citizens. The corresponding rate is more than 70 percent among those over the age of 50.¹² In Latin America, people under 30 participate less than those over 30 in all presidential elections on the continent.¹³ In Africa 65 per cent of those in 18-35 years voted as compared to 79 per cent of those in 36 years and above in the last National Election.¹⁴ In Asia youth turnout rate is generally 15 to 30 per cent lower than of people older than 35.¹⁵

In contrast, a declining interest in politics among youth is not a concern in India where youth exhibit several interesting attitudes: high participation in politics, high trust in democracy, high continuity and engagement in politics across generations, especially where there is a family tradition and - like the general population - a high trust in the army as an institution in contrast to the lowest trust in the police and political parties (KAF and CSDS, 2008).

India's Northeast has been the theatre of the earliest and longest-lasting insurgency in the country (Samir Kumar Das, 2007). Most of the works on Northeast have centred on this theme. Research on youth and political participation has, to say the least, not been a prominent theme in the social sciences in the region. Any attempt to explore this question is inevitably constrained by the available literature which is biased by the fact that most of the published research on young people's political participation has been done in Western countries. Therefore, to help bridge the information gap this study has been undertaken.

Methodology

This paper draws data from a study that was conducted between 2015-2017 in Nagaland. Nagaland has 60 Assembly Constituencies. For the study, 18 (eighteen) Assembly Constituencies were sampled for the survey using the Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) method. From each selected Assembly Constituency, 3 (three) polling stations has been selected. As it is practically not possible to make direct observation of every individual in the population, a representative sample was drawn to make inferences about the entire youth population according to Systematic Random Sampling Method. In order to generate the target sample for the study, the study sample has been drawn from the most updated electoral roll of the selected polling stations. Twenty respondents were selected from each sampled polling station. After the selection of the sample trained field investigators were send to conduct face to face interview of the selected

respondents using a standard set of Questionnaire. The study has a total sample of one thousand and twenty three (1023) respondents.

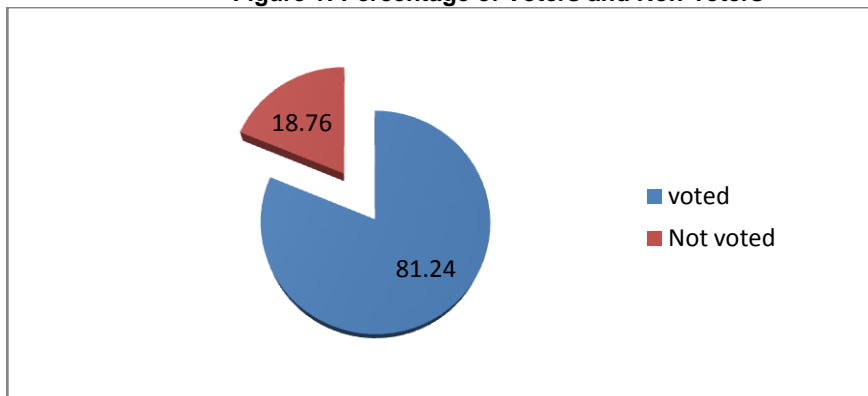
Discussion

While political participation may take many forms, it is argued that the least problematic, requiring the least resources and what is potentially the most powerful for most people, is voting.¹⁶ Voting is the main form of political participation in liberal democratic societies¹⁷ It is a means of determining and measuring consensus in a democratic society. Further, voting is a significant indicator of democratic

engagement, a minimal sign of an individual's democratic participation as a citizen and a useful indicator of the health of a democracy¹⁸. It affects the choice of public personnel and is the main mechanism by which representatives are made accountable to the people. Therefore the significance of voting in a study of political participation cannot be denied.

As reflected in Figure 1, out of 1023 respondents 80.94 per cent of them have exercised their franchise whereas 19.06 per cent respondents abstained from voting. This indicates that the young voters in Nagaland vote at a high rate.

Figure 1: Percentage of Voters and Non-voters



Source: Field Survey, 2015-2016

Perhaps as important as voting in an election is the process by which a citizen arrives at the decision whom to vote for. Many factors and issues play an important role in determining the voting decision of the electorate. Some people take pride for the effort put into for being informed and involved. Others vote out of a sense of duty because of their belief in democratic participation. Some may vote since they think that their contribution to the system is of vital significance. Others may vote because their friends, neighbours or relatives have cast their vote. It is also possible that some voters base their vote wholly or in part on other criteria, such as under the influence of the household members, the personality of the party candidate, the record or performance of the incumbent government, on the basis of issues and the state of their own economic well being. It is thus obvious that the reasons behind the act of voting are multifarious.

Thus to find out the factors that determine voting decision of youth they were asked what mattered to them while deciding whom to vote for.

Table 1: What mattered to you more while deciding whom to vote for?

| Items | Number | Percentage |
|-----------------|--------|------------|
| Political Party | 243 | 29.24 |
| Candidate | 516 | 62.09 |
| Issues | 45 | 5.42 |
| Others | 27 | 3.25 |
| Total | 831 | 100 |

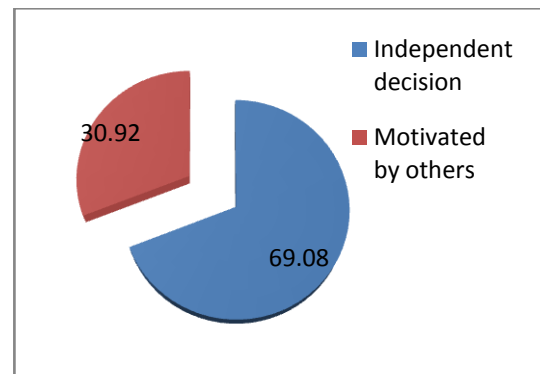
Source: Field Survey, 2015-2016

As summarized in Table 1, candidate is an important factor in determining voting decision for the youth. An overwhelming number of them (62.09%) identify candidate as an important factor influencing

their voting decision, whereas for 29.24 per cent of them party play a major role in voting decision. For a small minority of them (5.42 %) issue matters in influencing their voting decision.

Democracy is based on the principle of “one person, one vote”. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine whether the youth are exercising their right to franchise independently or not. It is possible that the young voters may be guided in their decision to vote by the judgement of others, for instance, by the elders. To answer this question, the respondents were asked whether they voted on their own will or were motivated by someone else.

Figure 2: Did you vote for a candidate on your own free will or were you motivated by someone else?



Source: Field Survey, 2015-2016

From the above figure it is clear that majority of the youth make voting decision independently.

Reasons for Vote Abstention

The study also sought to find out the reasons for voting abstention. Those reported not having voted in the Assemble Election of 2013, were asked to give their reasons for not voting. As reported in Table 2, amongst the diverse responses given by the non-voters, 'not interested in politics' was the largest single group of responses given for not voting (30.20%). This response is followed by 'voted by someone else'. 15.90 per cent of the youth could not exercise their franchise because their vote was cast by other voters.

Table 2: Reasons for not Voting

| Reasons for not Voting | Number | Percentage |
|--|------------|------------|
| Did not like any candidate | 19 | 9.90 |
| I am not interested in politics | 58 | 30.20 |
| There is no point in voting because my vote will not change anything | 26 | 13.54 |
| Name not included in electoral roll | 21 | 10.77 |
| Voted by others | 31 | 15.90 |
| Lack of party ideology | 14 | 7.18 |
| Not allowed to vote by opponent party | 16 | 8.20 |
| Poll violence | 10 | 5.13 |
| Out of station | 7 | 3.59 |
| Total | 195 | 100 |

Source : Field Survey, 2015-2016

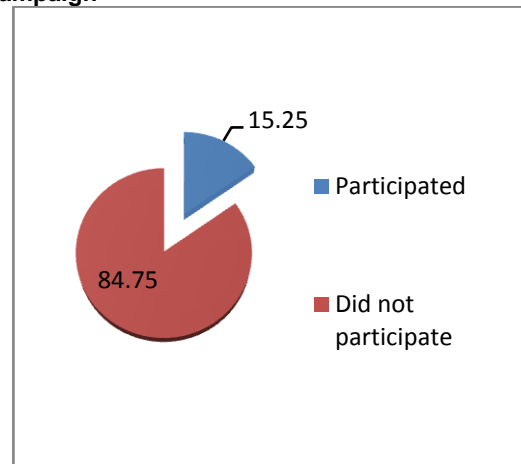
Around 13.54 per cent of youth opined that 'there is no point in voting because my vote will not change anything'. Some of them (10.77%) did not vote because their name was not included in electoral roll. Some of those who did not register to vote explained their reasons by a skeptical attitude towards political party or candidates, such as, 'did not like any party/candidate' (9.90%), 'lack of party ideology' (7.18%). Some could not vote because they were not allowed to vote by opponent party (8.20%) and due to poll violence (5.13%). The rest have given superficial reason for not voting, such as, being out of station (3.59%).

Youth Participation in Campaign

Voting is no doubt one of the most traditional and basic form of political participation in a representative democracy. However, a genuinely participatory political culture involves far more than simply the periodic casting of votes. It has also been argued that the political significance of voting, both in terms of its impact and the individual commitment that it requires is usually slight¹⁶. Voting is one very good indicator of people's participation in the electoral process. However, even if voting turnout is high it may not necessarily mean a high level of participation. Voting is an activity in which even the least involved can participate. Other modes of electoral activities require a lot of time, initiative and political interest on the part of the participant. Therefore, in order to analyze the political participation of youth in its entirety, the study go beyond the issue of voting, and try to look at their nature of participation in other modes of political activities as well.

The term election campaign is used to describe the persuasive activities that go on in the period before the actual casting of votes. Campaign activities require more initiative and are more difficult than voting, but these activities have more collective effects upon the decision-making process than voting. These also demand active, conscious and tactful participation¹⁷. For the present study a campaign activity is typified by campaigning for a candidate or party.

Figure 3: Youth Participation in Election Campaign



Source : Field Survey, 2015-2016

It is apparent that participation in campaign activity remains very much a minority pursuit for youth in Nagaland. Very few of them (15.25 %) campaigned for a candidate/party. Several reasons may be accounted for why youth abstain from such political activities. Campaigning for a candidate is a demanding activity. On needs to be physically mobile which necessitates remaining outside the home at places at odd hours as well as interacting with people from all walks of life? Such activities also demand greater initiative, inflexible time, effort, expenditure and commitment. Young people may not have the resources to engage in such time-intensive, expensive, or highly skilled forms of activity, such as campaigning for a candidate or party. Most of them would be engaged most of their time in pursuit of their education and careers.

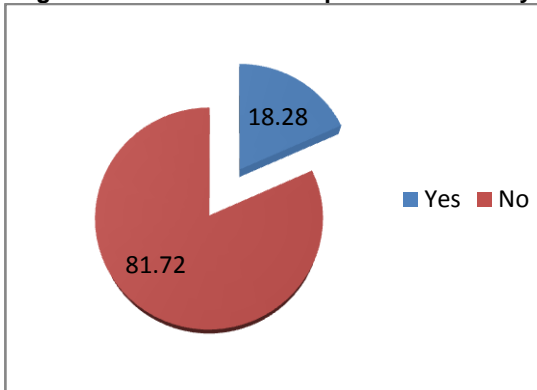
Another explanation could be the negative image of politics in general. Politics is also viewed as a 'dirty manipulative game of muscle and money power'¹⁸. such a negative projection of politics may be creating indifference, apathy and lack of interest in politics among the youth.

Youth Membership in Political Party

Membership in political party is a more sustained form of electoral participation. Parties perform three essential functions: they generate support for a regime; they mobilize and structure public opinion; and they recruit future leaders¹⁹. Political parties provide opportunities for citizens to participate in politics. They are the primary mechanism through which citizen's access elected office and political leadership. People become members of a political party for different reasons. For

many people political party may be the most common channel for gaining political experience. They provide an opportunity for involvement in public affairs. Some may join a party for personal interest, some under the influence of family members or friends, still some may become member of a party with a commitment that they may be able to do something for the community. Whatever may be the reasons for joining a political party, being a member is likely to generate an interest to take part in electoral activities²⁰.

Figure 4: Youth Membership in Political Party



Source : Field Survey, 2015-2016

From the above (Figure. 4), it becomes quite evident that very few youth are member of a political party. Only 18.28 per cent of them reported being a member of a political party and on the other hand, an overwhelming majority (81.72 %) of them is not a member of a political party. Young people's low membership in political party could possibly mean that the parties have not done enough to mobilize them. Such findings may pose some significant challenges for the political parties in Nagaland. Most of the political parties have an instrumentalist outlook towards youth electoral participation. They mobilize young voters just as an electoral force for the purpose of mustering votes for their party's candidates in the election.

The study findings suggest a negative endorsement of political parties by the young population. This may be an important reason why the youth have a relatively low level of party identification.

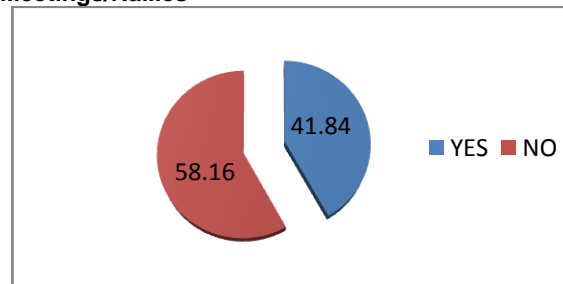
Young people appear to hold deeply sceptical views of the political players and of the way they conduct their activities in public. Speaking on their alienation from political parties some of the respondent made these comments: 'The things which concern the youth are not valued by party leaders', 'Political parties do not seek to connect with the young people or their concerns', 'Parties are only interested in people's votes, not in their opinions'. Casting a negative light on the political players some commented that, 'The politicians are untrustworthy and self cantered'. It could be that the opinions or issues that concern them are not valued by the political parties. It could also be argued that, rather than young people being apathetic towards political parties, it is in fact the politicians and parties which are indifferent and uninterested towards the youth.

Another reason why young people do not associate with political parties may be due to the reason that many of them are preoccupied with other interests and activities that dominate their lives leaving little time to participate in politics. It may also be due to the fact that politics may be boring and irrelevant to their lives at present. If young people participate less intensively this may not just be a matter of less interest, but might also be a result of the fact that political parties are not mobilising youth. From these narratives it is clear the political parties should do more to connect with the young people and listen to the issues that concern them.

Youth Attending Election Meetings/rallies

Attending election meeting or rallies is another mode of electoral participation. Election meetings are one of the important media for approaching the electorate collectively which is used to inform the electorate about the party, its programmes and symbol, and also for introducing the candidate to the electorate. Election meetings are usually organized by various political parties and people attend these meetings to express their solidarity in favour of a candidate and a political party, and also to listen to what the leaders have to say in the meetings. Political parties make efforts to mobilize as large number of people to attend public meeting as possible. By attending election meetings, the voters can get a lot of information, beyond who is running for what office. Informed voters can make good use of their vote and they may have more awareness of the election issues and the candidates. Besides, attending election meetings may also motivate the voters to take part in other forms of electoral activities.

Figure 5: Youth Participation in Election Meetings/Rallies



Source : Field Survey, 2015-2016

Data as shown in Figure 5 reveals that 41.84 per cent of youth reported attending election meeting. As compared to being a member of a political party and taking part in election campaign, youth seem to attend election meetings in large numbers.

Youth Participation in Political Discussion

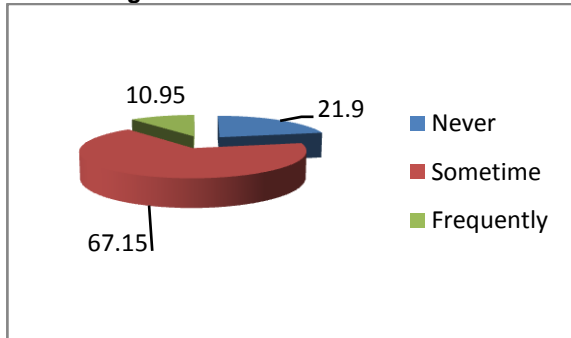
Unlike many other forms of electoral activities young people may get plenty of opportunities for engaging in political discussion, at least potentially. Since political discussion is by nature a social interaction, they may engage in or observe political discussion in the context of school, college or with parents, peers or others.

Discussing politics with others may stimulate a sense of political engagement. One who discusses

public affairs with others may increase his or her knowledge and information needed to evaluate candidates and issues intelligently. This awareness in turn may induce the person to participate in electoral activities. By discussing political issues with others, people may become quiet political minded.

For measuring political discussion, three frequencies has been included – frequently, sometimes and never - of discussing politics and public affairs with others.

Fig 6: Youth Political Discussion

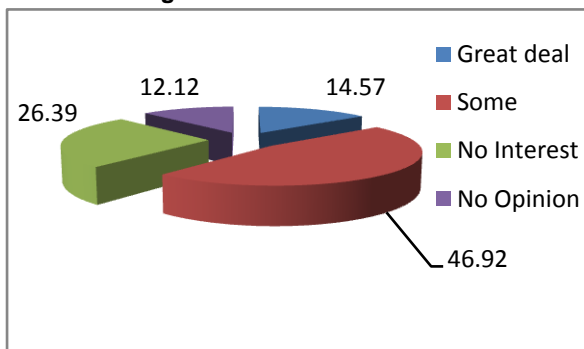


Source : Field Survey, 2015-2016

The data highlighted in Figure 6 shows that majority of youth (67.15 %) discuss politics sometimes whereas 21.90 per cent of them never discuss politics. Only 10.95 per cent of them discuss political issues and news frequently. Many reasons could be attributed why majority of youth discuss politics sometimes. Either they are not interested in politics or their awareness about politics and related issues is low.

Discussing politics with others is a matter of interest and awareness. Only when someone is interested in politics would one engage in political discussion. Moreover some level of political awareness is required for engaging in political discussion. As highlighted in Fig 7 majority of youth (46.92 %) have some interest in politics. They are followed by 26.39 per cent of them who have no interest in politics. Only 14.57 per cent of them say that they have great deal of interest in politics. Another 12.12 per cent of the youth have no opinion on the issue. This may be one of the reasons, which have held down youth's interest to engage in political discussion. Therefore having an interest in politics may stimulate a sense of political engagement.

Figure 7: Interest in Politics



Source : Field Survey, 2015-2016

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Almond and Verba²¹ and Verba et al.²² suggest that explanations of political participation are incomplete without incorporating civic participation into the equation. This is why the paper tries to examine and understand the social dimension of political participation. Though many studies have confirmed that political participation is influenced by the personal attributes of the individual voter, like age, education, income, marital status, occupation, etc, it may also be possible that participation in social organization will influence the nature and extent of political participation. One reason why organizational membership might be expected to effect political competence and activity is that the members of such organizations receive training for participation within the organization.

Table 3: Are you/have you ever been a member of any social service organization or NGO?

| Member of any social service organization or NGO? | Total No of Respondents | Percentage |
|---|-------------------------|------------|
| Yes | 227 | 22.19 |
| No | 796 | 77.81 |
| Total | 1023 | 100 |

Source : Field Survey, 2015-2016

To provide empirical evidence on these points, respondents were asked whether they are or have been a member of any social service organization or NGO. The data reveals that very few youth are member of any social service organization or NGO (22.19%). Majority of them (77.81%) does not seem to be interested in becoming member of any social service organization or NGO.

Further, to explore student's participation in different kinds of activities often associated with social movements they were asked if they have participated in any protest, demonstration or movement related to a society or political cause in the last two years. Just a minimal number of youth (18.08%) have taken part in protest, demonstration or movement related to a society or political cause.

Table 4: Have you participated in any protest, demonstration or movement related to a society or political cause in the last two years?

| Participation in any protest, demonstration or movement related to a society or political cause in the last two years | Total No of Respondents | Percentage |
|---|-------------------------|------------|
| Yes | 185 | 18.08 |
| No | 838 | 81.92 |
| Total | 1023 | 100 |

Source : Field Survey, 2015-2016

The study accounts low participatory behaviour among youth except for voting. Further, majority of youth does not seem to be interested in becoming members of any social service organization or NGO. And just a minimal number of them have taken part in protest, demonstration or movement related to a society or political cause. What accounts

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for a low degree of participation in politics amongst majority of youth may be their preoccupation with their studies which take up most of their time, leaving little time for any long-term interest in politics.

Conclusion

The paper has analysed the nature and extent of political participation of youth. This was examined by assessing their level of participation in voting, party membership, attending election meetings, campaigning for a candidate and taking part in political discussion. The study reveals that there are considerable differences in the level of engagement across dimensions of electoral activities among youth. Youth participation in voting is high (80.94 %). Voting is no doubt one very good indicator of people's participation in the electoral process. However, even if voting turnout is high it may not necessarily mean high level of participation. Voting is an activity in which even the least involved can participate. There are other modes of electoral activities which require a lot of time, initiative and political interest on the part of the participant. A minimal number of youth reported campaigning for a candidate or party during the Assembly Election of 2013. This reveals that participation in campaign activity remains very much a minority pursuit for youth in Nagaland.

As far as attending election meetings and rallies are concerned, this activity is moderately high as compared to taking part in election campaign or party membership.

As for membership in political party, very few youth reported being a member of a political party. Such findings may pose some significant challenge for the political parties in Nagaland. Low membership of youth in political party could possibly mean that the parties have not done enough to mobilize them. Most of the political parties have an instrumentalist outlook towards voters including youth. In other words, they mobilize voters, young and old just as an electoral force for the purpose of mustering votes for their party's candidates in the election.

Further, majority of youth does not seem to be interested in becoming members of any social service organization or NGO. And just a minimal number of them have taken part in protest, demonstration or movement related to a society or political cause.

Most forms of political participation require an investment of at least some time. Young people may be busy pursuing their studies and building their careers. Such responsibilities may restrict them of the free time necessary for political involvement. Therefore what accounts for a low degree of participation in politics amongst majority of youth may be their preoccupation with their studies which take up most of their time, leaving little time for any long-term interest in politics.

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