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From Apathy to Activism: Political Participation among Public and Private University Students in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Student politics remains deeply contested in Bangladesh, yet few empirical studies compare public and private university students using a single validated instrument that can statistically test group differences. This cross-sectional study addressed that gap using stratified random sampling to survey 400 students (200 public, 200 private) across eight universities. Drawing on the Civic Voluntarism Model, it examined political attitudes, engagement, active participation, the July 2024 movement, and the institutional environment using Cronbach's α, independent-samples t-tests, χ^2 tests, correlations, and multiple regression in SPSS. Because the questionnaire's original item groupings did not hold together statistically, revised composite scales were constructed and used throughout (α = 0.77- 0.84). Public students scored significantly higher than private students on all three composite measures, with large effect sizes (d = 1.57-2.04), and reported markedly higher direct participation in the July 2024 movement (100% vs. 78%, $\chi^2(1) = 47.22$, $p < .001$), a finding that should be interpreted with some caution given the complete absence of variation among public respondents. A multiple regression predicting active participation ($R^2 = 0.715$) identified political engagement as the strongest predictor (β = 0.49), followed by university type (β = 0.34), which remained significant despite its collinearity with family income. These results suggest that the public-private participation gap reflects institutional context as much as individual attitudes and engagement, with implications for how universities structure channels for student political expression.

Keywords: *Political participation, university students, public and private universities, student politics, July 2024 movement, institutional environment, Bangladesh*

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1. Introduction

Political participation is central to democratic life. It allows citizens to voice their preferences, shape collective decisions, and hold institutions to account (Verba & Nie, 1987). Young people are a key part of this picture, and university students even more so, since university is often where they first learn to debate political issues, work with others and take part in collective action. Students are not a uniform group, however. Their political views and behavior may be shaped by family background, field of study, interest in politics, peer networks, social media

use and institutional culture, and the institution itself can influence whether students feel free to express political opinions at all (Boulianne, 2015; Campbell, 2008).

In Bangladesh, students have long been part of national political life. In 1952, students at the University of Dhaka led the protests for the recognition of Bangla, and several were killed (Y. Arafat, 2024; Haque, 2025). This history has a darker side. Party-linked student wings have been described as exercising strong control over campuses, at times through violence (Kuttig, 2019; Suykens, 2018). Student politics is therefore debated today in terms of campus safety, party influence, pressure to join organizations, and its effect on students' studies. Students are unlikely to respond to it in the same way, and their response may depend on the type of university they attend (Arafat & Fahmida, 2025).

Public and private universities offer quite different political settings. Public universities have residential halls and long-established student organizations linked to political parties (M. Hossain, 2025). Private universities present themselves as politically neutral. Reporting that draws on University Grants Commission sources notes that the law says nothing explicit about political activity at private universities, yet several have announced bans on it (Chowdhury et al., 2020). Private university students are therefore often assumed to be politically detached.

The July 2024 movement challenged this assumption. It began as a protest against the quota system in government jobs, and during July, students from several private universities in Dhaka, including North South University, Independent University, Bangladesh, and American International University-Bangladesh, joined the demonstration (Rana et al., 2026). The movement ended with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's resignation on 5 August 2024 (Ahmad, 2025). Its aftermath has also reopened the debate over student politics. Bans were introduced at a number of public universities (Prothom Alo, 2024), and a government task force recommended a ban at all public and private universities (Business Standard, 2025). Policy in this area needs evidence on how students actually take part in politics.

Participation also increasingly moves between offline and online spaces. Students may follow political news, discuss politics with friends, post their views on social media, attend meetings and rallies, join organizations, vote in university elections or take part in demonstrations. Research on Dhaka University students has linked social media use to offline political participation(Mahmud & Amin, 2017). Membership of a political organization is only one part of what students do, and studies that count only this miss the rest.

The existing evidence is thin. Most studies look at a single university. A recent survey of 100 students at the University of Rajshahi, for example, found that most respondents were not currently involved in student politics and that large majorities supported reform (Barik et al., 2026). A single-university study that reports percentages cannot show how the two sectors differ or what explains participation.

This study addresses that gap by using one questionnaire with students from both public and private universities. It measures attitudes toward student politics, perceived political influence, participation in discussions, rallies, social media expression, student organizations, meetings with political leaders, university elections, and voluntary activities, involvement in the July 2024 movement, and perceptions of conditions at the university. Drawing on the Civic Voluntarism Model (Penker & Kirbiš, 2026), it asks two questions. Do students in public and private universities differ in their political participation? Are political attitudes and institutional conditions linked to students' involvement?

1.1 Research Objectives

To compare political participation between public and private university students in Bangladesh and examine the associated factors, using the Civic Voluntarism Model extended to include the institutional environment.

Objectives:

1. To compare political attitudes, political engagement and active political participation between public and private university students.
2. To compare participation in the July 2024 movement between the two groups.
3. To examine the association between political attitudes, peer discussion, social media expression and active political participation.
4. To examine the role of the perceived institutional environment in shaping participation.
5. To identify the factors that jointly predict active political participation.

1.2 Research questions

1. Do political attitudes, political engagement and active political participation differ between public and private university students in Bangladesh?
2. Did participation in the July 2024 movement differ between public and private university students?
3. Are political attitudes, peer discussion and social media expression associated with active political participation?
4. Is the perceived institutional environment associated with political participation?
5. Which factors jointly predict active political participation when attitudes, engagement, institutional environment, university type and demographics are considered together?

2. Literature Review

Verba, Schlozman and Brady's (1995) resource model treats political participation as any activity that affects public policy, directly or by shaping who holds power. Voting is one activity among many, alongside protest, organizational membership, campaign work and, more recently, online activity. The same authors identify three barriers to participation: people cannot, do not want to, or are never asked (Verba et al., 1995). These imply different remedies resource-based, motivational, or network-based which is why this study measures several forms of participation and several candidate drivers rather than a single score.

Students have shaped Bangladesh's politics since the 1952 language movement (Shahriar, 2026). After independence, the major parties built campus wings that have long controlled residential halls and university political life (Diplomat, 2024). Kuttig (2019) and Suykens (2018) describe these organizations as political machines that supply violent labor and personal loyalty to their parent parties, while Alam et al. (2011) link this involvement to outcomes for national development and higher education. Al Mahmud and Mahmud (2024) argue that this violent, parochial culture has steadily weakened good governance on public campuses since 1991. The human cost has been high: 128 deaths and 4,290 injuries from campus political violence between 1974 and 2001, mostly at Dhaka University (ISAS, 2026) But this literature says little about the many students who are not party members, the population surveyed here.

Fewer studies ask students directly what they think. Hossain et al. (2014) found mixed views among 75 students, with hall access a common motive for joining despite acknowledged academic costs. Barik et al. (2026), surveying 100 University of Rajshahi students, found that

70% were not currently involved, 60% were positive about student politics, and 69% wanted reform, with awareness, leadership development, and party influence as the leading motivations. Ali et al. (2024), surveying 125 students across ten public universities, found similar ambivalence: most had entered politics only after starting university and cited peer or institutional influence, yet a majority doubted their own engagement was principled or beneficial to the academic environment. Shiddike and Bockarie (2020) argue that partisan involvement by teachers and students diverts attention from teaching. These studies rely on small, purposive, single-institution samples and descriptive percentages, so none can say which factors are statistically associated with participation once other factors are held constant.

Public universities house residential halls and entrenched party wings; private universities present themselves as neutral, though the law neither permits nor bans campus politics outright and several have imposed bans (Dhaka Tribune, 2022). Even so, many private-university students who see politics as unnecessary still want some channel to raise concerns (Hossain, 2025). A pattern echoed in Malaysia, where family background and campus environment were the strongest predictors of political behavior (Besar et al., 2015). What the Bangladesh literature still lacks is a direct, instrument-based comparison of the two sectors the gap this study is designed to fill.

Evidence on online versus offline participation is mixed. Mahmud and Amin (2017) found a positive link between social media use and offline participation, and studies of the July 2024 movement stress how platforms amplified awareness and coordinated mobilization. Hossain et al. (2025), however, found that high digital engagement among 300 Dhaka students rarely translated into offline action, shaped by efficacy and trust on one side and privacy and surveillance concerns on the other. None of these studies directly compares public and private students, so this study treats social media expression as one form of participation among several, rather than assuming it predicts the rest.

Pre-2024 movements such as the quota reform and road safety protests showed young people could shift public debate outside party structures (Ghosh, 2026; Roy, 2026). The July 2024 movement grew from this history, drawing students from both sectors into the streets and ending in Sheikh Hasina's resignation (Islam & Hossain, 2026; Manik & Rahman, 2026), after which several universities banned student politics outright (Business Standard, 2025; The Diplomat, 2024). Most scholarship on the movement examines its online mobilization; few ask whether public and private students took part differently, or whether participation in it tracked their routine political behavior, a question this study addresses directly.

3. Research Gaps

Three gaps follow from this review. First, existing studies focus on single public universities or single cities and rely on descriptive percentages; none compares public and private students using a shared instrument that can statistically test group differences. Second, attitudes and participation are rarely measured separately, even though a student can hold strong political views without ever acting on them, or act without holding strong views. Third, the pressure to join a party-affiliated organization, a recurring theme in the Bangladesh literature, is seldom distinguished from participation that students choose voluntarily. This study addresses all three gaps by surveying 400 students across both sectors, measuring attitudes and participation as separate constructs, and testing whether university type, along with other resource and network variables, predicts each form of engagement.

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4. Overview of Student Politics in Bangladesh

Student politics in Bangladesh predates independence. Students led the Language Movement of 1952, the 1962 and 1969 mass movements, and the 1971 Liberation War, in which student activists organized armed resistance (Barik et al., 2026). After independence, the major parties built their own student wings on campus: the Bangladesh Chhatra League (Awami League, 1949), the Bangladesh Jatiyotabadi Chhatra Dal (BNP, 1979) and the Islami Chhatra Shibir (Jamaat-e-Islami, 1977), alongside leftist groups such as Chhatra Union and Chhatra Moitri (Barik et al., 2026). Under military rule (1982-1990), student alliances again united across party lines against General Ershad, forcing his resignation in 1990 and restoring parliamentary democracy (Alam, 2019; Barik et al., 2026).

Yet the 1991 transition to competitive party rule entrenched partisan control on campus instead of ending it: student wings grew dependent on party patronage, fueling conflict over hall control(Kuttig, 2019; Suykens, 2018)and student union elections were suspended for decades at most public universities. The 2010s brought a parallel shift toward issue-based, less party-affiliated mobilization: the 2013 Shahbagh movement and the 2018 Quota Reform and Road Safety movements (Ghosh, 2026; Zainuddin et al., 2025) culminating in the July 2024 uprising: the interim government banned the BCL as a "terrorist organization" (Ahmed, 2025), Student union elections resumed in 2025, and student activists founded the Jatiya Nagorik Party, Bangladesh's first student-led political party (Barik et al., 2026; Sarkar, 2025). This situates the study's respondents at a moment when the institutional shape of student politics is still unsettled.

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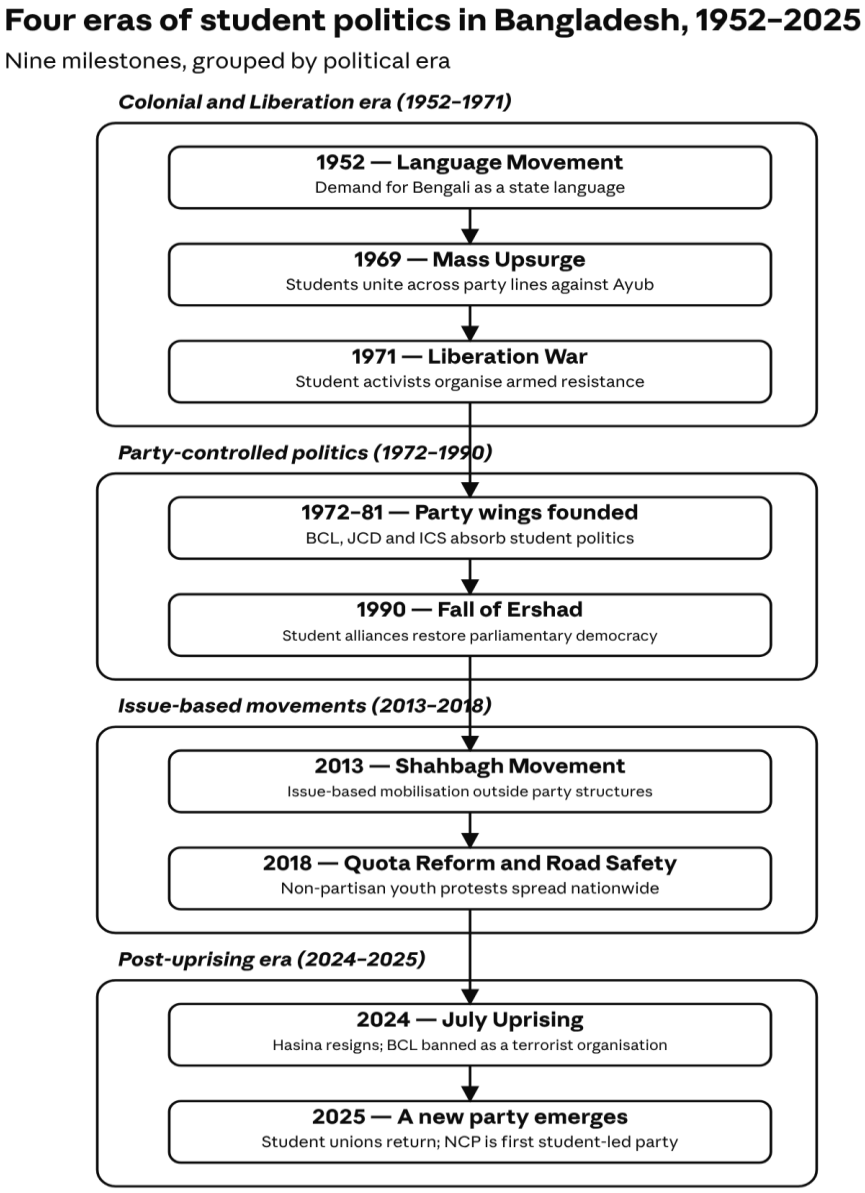


Figure 1: Timeline of student politics in Bangladesh, 1952-2025

5. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

5.1 Theoretical framework: the Civic Voluntarism Model

The study uses the Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba et al., 1995) as its theoretical framework, which explains participation through three factors: resources (time, money, civic skills), psychological engagement (interest, information, efficacy) and recruitment through social networks (Brady et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995). It suits a student population because it separates what students have, what they care about and who draws them in. Because the model was developed in the United States, we adapt it here by treating the direction of the resource effect as an empirical question, since party wings recruit through halls of residence regardless

of students' resources. A fourth element, institutional environment, is added because students do not choose their campus's political rules.

How the Civic Voluntarism Model is applied in this study

In this study, resources correspond to socio-demographic characteristics (Q1, Q2, Q4-Q7); psychological engagement is captured through political attitudes (Q8-Q18) and engagement behaviors such as peer discussion (Q19, Q22, Q23); recruitment and networks appear as peer discussion and organizational pressure (Q22, Q27); and the added institutional context is measured through university type and institutional environment (Q3, Q33-Q35). The main outcome, active participation (Q20, Q21, Q24-Q26, Q28), and the contextual outcome, July 2024 movement participation (Q29-Q32), are treated separately.

Organizational involvement and meetings with political leaders (Q24, Q25) belong to the outcome, not to the networks, to avoid predicting participation with itself.

5.2 A complementary lens: Political Socialization Theory

While the Civic Voluntarism Model explains who participates, it says less about why public and private students arrive at politics with different starting attitudes. The study therefore also draws on Political Socialization Theory (Easton, 1968; Searing, 1986)which holds that political orientations are learned through family, school, peer groups and, at university, the campus environment. It serves as a complementary lens: it explains how the Civic Voluntarism Model's resources, engagement, and networks then convert attitudes and habits into participation.

Public universities in this study retain party-affiliated student wings and hall-based recruitment, socializing students into partisan participation from their first year. Private universities generally prohibit organized student politics, so students there are socialized toward career-oriented or issue-based civic norms, with political engagement occurring off-campus by individual choice. This distinction motivates the comparative design and the expectation that the two groups differ not only in participation levels but in their form.

5.3 Hypotheses

H1. Political attitudes differ between public and private students.

H2. Political participation differs between public and private students.

H3. July 2024 movement participation differs by university type.

H4. Attitudes, engagement, institutional environment, university type and demographics jointly explain participation.

6. Methodology

6.1 Selection of the Study Area:

This study was conducted among students of eight universities in Bangladesh, selected to capture the contrast between party-affiliated public campuses and largely apolitical private campuses. Four public universities (University of Dhaka, University of Rajshahi, University of Chittagong and Jahangirnagar University) and four private universities (North South University, BRAC University, American International University-Bangladesh and Daffodil International University) were included, chosen for their established history and for representing the public-private divide central to this study's comparison.

6.2 Population and Sampling Method:

The population is students currently enrolled at these eight universities. Respondents were selected using stratified random sampling: an equal quota of 50 students was set for each of the eight universities, and within each university, respondents were selected at random from among students willing to participate, so that the final sample reflects both sectors in equal measure. The researcher administered questionnaires offline, in paper form, visiting each campus in person to distribute them and collect responses directly from students. Data collection took place over one academic semester, following the July 2024 movement, so respondents could speak to both their routine political participation and their experience of that movement.

6.3 Sample Size

Table 1: Sampling overview

University type	Universities	Respondents
Public	Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong, Jahangirnagar	200 (50 each)
Private	North South, BRAC, AIUB, Daffodil International	200 (50 each)
Total	8 universities	400

6.4 Instrument and Data Collection

Researchers collected primary data through a structured, paper-based questionnaire from 400 students across eight selected public and private universities in Bangladesh. Researchers administered the questionnaires directly to respondents on campus, offline. Data collection was conducted over one academic semester following the July 2024 movement. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study's academic purpose and confidentiality. Secondary data included prior surveys and case studies on Bangladeshi student politics, news coverage of the July 2024 movement, and relevant policy documents.

6.5 Data Processing and Analysis

The collected data were manually checked, coded, and entered into SPSS for analysis. The dataset was screened for missing and inconsistent responses before analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, summarized the data. We used independent-samples t-tests and chi-square tests to compare political attitudes and participation between public- and private-university students. We also conducted Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analyses to examine relationships among political attitudes, engagement, institutional environment, and political participation. We used a 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$). We completed reliability testing and composite-score construction before this analysis.

6.6 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to standard ethical research practices throughout data collection. Before administering the questionnaire, respondents were briefed on the study's academic purpose and the voluntary nature of their participation, and they provided informed consent before proceeding. No personally identifying information was collected; responses were recorded anonymously and used strictly for academic purposes. Respondents were free to decline any question or withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Given the politically sensitive nature of some items, the researchers took care in wording and administration to avoid pressuring respondents or exposing individual answers. Because the study posed minimal risk,

relied on anonymous self-report data, and involved no vulnerable populations, the researchers' home department oversaw it under its standard procedures for voluntary participation and informed consent in survey-based research.

7. Results

All results below are computed from the 400-respondent dataset submitted for this study. University type is coded from Q3 (public = Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong, Jahangirnagar; private = North South, BRAC, AIUB, Daffodil International), with 50 respondents per university.

7.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents:

Table 2: Respondent characteristics by university type (N = 400)

Variable	Category	Public University		Private University	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	175	87.5%	114	57.0%
	Female	25	12.5%	86	43.0%
Age	18-20	24	12.0%	52	26.0%
	21-23	151	75.5%	60	30.0%
	24-26	24	12.0%	68	34.0%
	Above 26	1	0.5%	20	10.0%
Year of study	1st	2	1.0%	28	14.0%
	2nd	68	34.0%	46	23.0%
	3rd	112	56.0%	64	32.0%
	4th	12	6.0%	48	24.0%
	Master's	6	3.0%	14	7.0%
Residence	Hall	79	39.5%	1	0.5%
	Private mess	116	58.0%	87	43.5%
	Family home	5	2.5%	69	34.5%
	Rented flat	0	0.0%	43	21.5%
Family income (BDT/month)	Below 25,000	17	8.5%	0	0.0%
	25,001-50,000	162	81.0%	8	4.0%
	50,001-75,000	21	10.5%	40	20.0%
	75,001-100,000	0	0.0%	77	38.5%
	Above 100,000	0	0.0%	75	37.5%

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Table 2 shows that the two groups differ sharply on background characteristics, not only on university type. Public respondents are overwhelmingly male (87.5% vs. 12.5% female) and concentrated in the 21-23 age band (75.5%) and the third year of study (56.0%), whereas private respondents are more gender-balanced (57.0% male, 43.0% female) and more evenly spread across age groups and years. Residence also differs: 39.5% of public respondents live in university halls and 58.0% in mess accommodation, while private respondents are concentrated in family homes (34.5%) and rented flats (21.5%), with almost none in halls. Family income shows the sharpest contrast: 81.0% of public respondents report a monthly income of 25,001-50,000 BDT, while 76.0% of private respondents report incomes above 75,000 BDT. Because university type, residence, and family income move so closely together in the sample, the design treats their collinearity as a limitation, making it difficult to statistically isolate their separate effects on participation.

7.2 Reliability

Table 3: Cronbach's alpha for the final composite scales

Construct	Number of Items	Alpha (α)
Attitudes (support for student politics)	6	.84
Political engagement	2	.77
Active participation	5	.78

Table 3 shows that the questionnaire items did not hold together as originally grouped, so reliability testing was used to correct this before further analysis. The original attitude and institutional-environment blocks both returned negative α as single scales, indicating that each mixes more than one underlying dimension and cannot be treated as one construct, so the institutional-environment items are analysed individually rather than combined. Item-total analysis instead identified three coherent subsets: a support-for-student-politics scale (α = .84), an engagement scale (α = .77) and an active-participation scale (α = .78), all comfortably above the conventional .70 threshold and usable with confidence.

7.3 Public-private comparison (H1, H2):

Table 4: Group comparison, independent-samples t-test (df = 398)

Variable	Public M (SD)	Private M (SD)	t	p	Cohen's d
Attitudes (support for student politics)	3.84 (0.29)	2.85 (0.62)	20.39	< .001	2.04
Political engagement	2.60 (0.59)	1.48 (0.81)	15.73	< .001	1.57
Active participation	2.14 (0.70)	1.44 (0.27)	13.32	< .001	2.47
Pressure to join an organization	1.65 (0.75)	1.08 (0.27)	10.12	< .001	1.01
Political efficacy	3.54 (1.03)	2.93 (0.95)	6.14	< .001	0.61
Trust in student leaders	3.77 (0.88)	2.67 (1.06)	11.32	< .001	1.13
Following political news	3.54 (1.03)	2.93 (0.95)	6.14	< .001	0.37

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Public university students score significantly higher than private university students on every variable in this comparison, and most gaps are large by conventional standards. The clearest differences are on active participation (M = 2.47 vs. 1.32, d = 2.47), attitudes (M = 3.84 vs. 2.85, d = 2.04), and engagement (d = 1.57), all well above Cohen's threshold for a large effect (d ≥ 0.8). Trust in student leaders (d = 1.13) and pressure to join an organization (d = 1.01) also show large gaps, suggesting public students are more embedded in campus political life as both participants and recruitment targets. Political efficacy is a more moderate difference (d = 0.61), while following political news is the one relatively close variable (d = 0.37): private students nearly match public students here despite trailing on everything else. Overall, the public-private gap is broad and consistent across nearly every measure.

7.4 Forms of Political Participation:

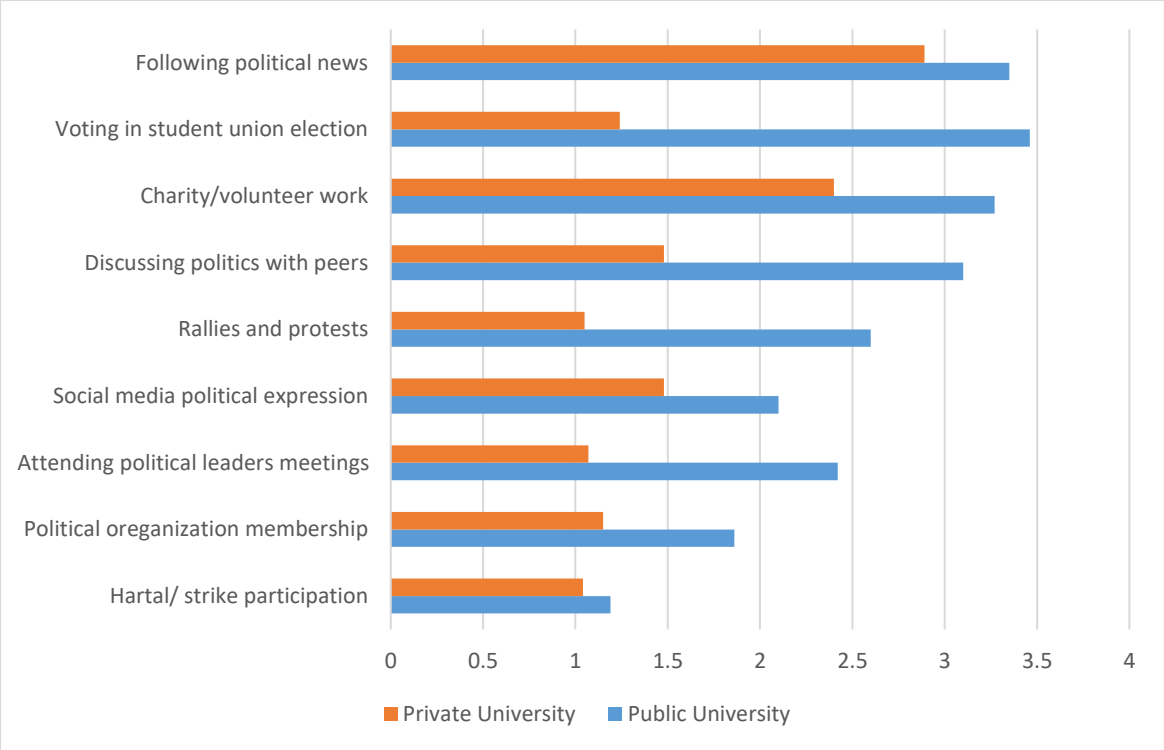


Figure 2: Forms of Political Participation by University Type

As Figure 2 shows, following political news, charity or volunteer work with a political wing, and voting in student union elections are the three most frequently reported activities overall, while hartal or strike participation is consistently the least frequent across both sectors. Public students report higher average frequencies than private students on every single form of participation measured, with no exceptions. The largest public-private gaps appear in voting in student union elections (M = 3.46 vs. 1.24) and discussing politics with peers (M = 3.10 vs. 1.48), while the smallest gap is on hartal or strike participation (M = 1.19 vs. 1.04), where both groups report low engagement. Informal activities such as discussion and social media use are generally more frequent than formal organizational activities, though this is not absolute: among public students, attending leaders' meetings (M = 2.42) is actually more frequent than social media expression (M = 2.10), suggesting formal channels remain relevant on public campuses.

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7.5 July 2024 movement participation (H3)

Table 5: Direct participation by university type

University type	Yes		No		Total
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	
Public	200	100%	0	0%	200
Private	156	78%	44	22%	200
Total	356	89%	44	11%	400

Table 5 shows that direct participation in the July 2024 movement was high across both sectors but significantly higher among public respondents: all 200 public respondents (100%) reported attending a protest, compared with 156 of 200 private respondents (78%), chi-square $\chi^2(1) = 47.22$, $p < .001$, Cramér's V = 0.34. Overall, 89% of respondents participated directly, suggesting July 2024 drew far more students than routine political activity. As a rough convergent-validity check, a closely related item on facing police or administrative action showed an almost identical pattern (98.9% of participants vs. 6.8% of non-participants; Cramér's V = 0.90 between the two items), indicating that self-reported direct participation is a reasonably reliable measure in this sample. The complete lack of variation among public respondents warrants some caution, since it could reflect genuine near-universal mobilization or a ceiling effect in how the question was asked.

7.6 Correlations

Table 6: Correlation matrix, composite scales and pressure (N = 400)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Attitudes	1			
2. Political engagement	.50**	1		
3. Pressure to join	.32**	.32**	1	
4. Active participation	.68**	.71**	.45**	1

** $p < .01$.

As Table 6 shows, attitudes (r = .68), engagement (r = .71), and pressure (r = .45) are all positively associated with active participation, and engagement shows the strongest association. At the item level (single-item coefficients, not tabulated in Table 6), both components of engagement are individually associated with participation: peer discussion (r = .77, $p < .001$) and social media expression (r = .50, $p < .001$).

The three institutional-environment items do not move together as a single construct (Section 5.2) and their relationships with participation also differ in direction and strength. Hall system forcing political alignment is negatively associated with participation (r = -.62, $p < .001$); admin prevention of political groups shows a small but statistically significant positive association with participation (r = .16, p = .002); and feeling safe expressing political views is positively

associated with participation ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). Institutional conditions therefore matter, but not as a single dimension, and not always in a consistent direction.

7.7 Regression (H4)

Table 7: Multiple regression predicting active participation

Predictor	B	SE	Beta (β)	t	p
Attitudes	0.218	0.043	.204	5.12	< .001
Political engagement	0.274	0.029	.337	9.30	< .001
University type (public = 1)	0.721	0.104	.491	6.92	< .001
Family income	0.032	0.031	.053	1.02	.306
Hall residence (hall = 1)	-0.087	0.058	-.047	-1.50	.136

Model: $R^2 = .715$, adjusted $R^2 = .711$, $F(5, 394) = 197.57$, $p < .001$.

The overall model is significant and explains 71.5% of the variance in active participation. Political engagement is the strongest individual predictor (β = .49), followed by university type (β = .34), attitudes (β = .20) and family income and hall residence do not reach significance once the others are in the model. University type remains a significant predictor even though it correlates strongly with family income in this sample ($r = -.84$) and, to a lesser degree, with hall residence ($r = .49$), producing a VIF = 6.96 for university type; the fact that it still emerges as significant despite this collinearity is a fairly strong indication that its effect is real rather than an artefact of the other background variables. Together with the large bivariate group differences reported in Section 7.3, this supports treating the university sector as a genuine, independent correlate of political participation, alongside individual differences in attitudes and engagement.

8. Discussion

8.1 Public-Private Differences

Public university students in this sample score substantially higher than private students on attitudes toward student politics, engagement, and active participation, with large effect sizes ($d = 1.6$ to 2.5). This gap is considerably sharper than earlier, smaller-sample comparisons suggested: a survey of 75 students across public and private universities reported differences in attitudes toward student politics and identified access to residential halls as an important practical factor influencing public university students' involvement, rather than a divide of the magnitude observed in the present study (Hossain et al., 2014). The present findings support that institutional explanation while extending it: the gap is not confined to organized politics but appears in informal discussion and social media expression too, suggesting that the institutional advantage public universities hold residential halls and entrenched, party-linked student organizations (Kuttig, 2019; Suykens, 2018) shapes everyday political life on campus, not just formal participation. This also echoes findings from a study of Malaysian university students, which examined the relationship between the campus environment and students'

political behavior, suggesting that the university setting may play a similar socializing role beyond Bangladesh (Besar et al., 2015).

The gap should not be read only as a pure effect of "university type" as an institution, however. Public and private respondents in this sample differ sharply in gender balance, income, and residence, and these variables are strongly correlated with university type itself. Even so, the regression in Table 7.6 shows that once attitudes and engagement are accounted for, university type still adds a significant, independent effect on active participation ($\beta = .49$, $p < .001$) despite being highly collinear with family income and hall residence, which is a fairly demanding test for it to pass. The safer conclusion is that public and private students differ strongly in participation for at least two distinct reasons: individual differences in attitudes and engagement, and something about university type itself, whether that is the institutional environment, organizational infrastructure, or peer context, that is not fully captured by attitudes, engagement, income, or residence.

8.2 Attitudes, Engagement and Participation

Engagement is more strongly associated with participation ($r = .72$) than attitudes are ($r = .64$), and engagement is also the stronger individual predictor in the regression ($\beta = .42$ vs. .26 for attitudes), though university type ($\beta = .35$) falls between the two. This matches the idea that holding an opinion about student politics is not the same as discussing it with peers or posting about it, and that the latter is closer to actual participation (Besar et al., 2015). Peer discussion in particular is strongly associated with participation ($r = .75$), more so than social media expression ($r = .53$), which suggests that face-to-face networks still carry more weight than online ones in this sample, even though both matter (Mahmud & Amin, 2017).

8.3 Institutional Environment

The three institutional-environment items do not move together, and this is itself a finding worth taking seriously rather than a measurement failure to explain away. Feeling safe expressing political views is positively associated with participation ($r = .45$), which fits expectations: students who feel safer speak up more. In this sample, perceiving that administrations prevent political groups shows only a small positive association with participation ($r = .16$, $p = .002$). Perceiving that the hall system forces political alignment is negatively associated with participation ($r = -.62$), which runs against a simple story where more institutional pressure produces more participation; students who see the hall system as coercive report less active participation, not more. One reading is that this item captures resentment of the system rather than involvement in it, and that students who are most enmeshed in hall-based politics may describe their own position differently from students observing it from outside. The current items cannot resolve this distinction and would benefit from either revised wording or a qualitative follow-up.

8.4 The July 2024 Movement

Direct participation in the July 2024 movement was high in both sectors, and higher among public respondents (100%) than private respondents (78%). Every public respondent in this sample reporting participation is an unusually clean result, and it is worth treating with some caution: it may reflect a genuinely near-universal mobilization on public campuses, a sampling pattern (all fifty respondents from each public university reporting participation), or a ceiling effect in how the question was asked. Check the finding against other sources before treating it as a precise population estimate. What is clearer is the direction: private students, who scored far lower on routine attitudes and participation, still joined the movement in large numbers,

and reported a slightly larger shift in their sense of unity with public students than public students themselves did. This aligns with July 2024 functioning as a distinct, issue-specific episode rather than an extension of routine student politics, and it echoes prior scholarship showing that Bangladeshi youth mobilize rapidly around a shared grievance even without standing party organization (Ghosh, 2023).

8.5 Theoretical Contribution

The results partly support the Civic Voluntarism Model. Engagement, the model's psychological-involvement component, is the strongest predictor of participation, consistent with the model's emphasis on interest and motivation. University type also carries a significant, independent effect, which fits the model's resource and recruitment components: institutional infrastructure (halls, established organizations) and network exposure differ systematically between the sectors. Family income, by contrast, does not predict participation once attitudes, engagement and university type are included, which is very likely a product of its near-total overlap with university type in this sample rather than evidence that material resources do not matter. The institutional-environment items, added to the model as context specific to Bangladesh, turn out not to behave as one construct at all, which suggests that a single "institutional context" variable is too coarse for this setting; safety, coercion and administrative restriction appear to be distinct experiences with different relationships to participation, and future work in this context may do better to model them separately from the start.

9. Conclusion

This study compared political participation between 200 public and 200 private university students in Bangladesh. Public students scored significantly higher on attitudes toward student politics, engagement, and active participation, with large effect sizes, and this pattern held for direct participation in the July 2024 movement as well, though the complete absence of non-participants among public respondents should be interpreted with some caution. Political engagement, particularly peer discussion, was the strongest correlate of active participation, but university type also had a significant independent effect once attitudes and engagement were included in the regression, despite its strong correlation with family income in this sample. The institutional environment did not behave as a single dimension: feeling safe expressing political views was associated with more participation, perceiving hall-based coercion with less, and perceiving administrative restriction with only a small positive association. Student political participation is best understood as multidimensional, spanning discussion, online expression, voting, organizational involvement, and movement participation, and shaped by both individual engagement and the institutional and social context of the university sector itself. These findings carry practical implications: universities could provide non-coercive channels for students to express political views and be represented; civic and political education could support informed, constructive engagement; voluntary participation should be protected from pressure to join organizations; and digital platforms should be recognized as legitimate spaces for student civic engagement.

10. Limitations

The cross-sectional design cannot establish causation, and self-reported participation may be affected by social-desirability bias, particularly given that every public respondent reported attending a July 2024 protest. University type, family income, and hall residence are highly collinear in this sample, limiting how cleanly their separate effects can be isolated; the sample is drawn from eight named universities and cannot be generalized to all Bangladeshi students.

The revised, data-driven composite scales used here should also be disclosed as exploratory rather than pre-registered.

11. Future Research

Future work should extend the two-item engagement scale, disentangle which university type it captures given its collinearity with income and residence (VIF = 6.96), and follow up on the near-universal public participation in July 2024 with random sampling and qualitative interviews to rule out a ceiling or social-desirability effect. Longitudinal designs and broader, more representative samples including comparisons with other South Asian countries would also test how far these findings generalize.

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