

POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES: PERSPECTIVES FROM STUDENTS AND FACULTY AT MIRPUR UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, AZAD JAMMU AND KASHMIR

Muntazir Abbas^{*1}, Sohaib Khaliq²

^{*1}Department of International Relations, Mirpur University of Science and Technology, AJK

²Department of International Relations, University of Kotli, AJK

^{*1}muntazirabbas490@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This exploratory survey study investigates the political culture and democratic attitudes of students and faculty at Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST), Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK). Utilizing a structured instrument and stratified probability sampling, the study examines political engagement, acceptance of democratic values, and trust in institutions among the university community. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, including the Chi-square test, to identify patterns and relationships. The findings reveal significant variations across demographic factors such as gender, age, and academic roles, highlighting the coexistence of "Subject" and "Participant" political cultures within the university. As the first systematic exploration of political culture in AJK, this study offers valuable insights and serves as a foundation for future research on understanding and promoting democratic attitudes. Based on its findings, the study offers targeted recommendations for strengthening democratic values in AJK and similar regions.

Keywords: Political culture, Democratic attitudes, Trust in institutions, Higher education, AJK.

INTRODUCTION

Political culture lies at the heart of modern polities, shaping the attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals toward politics and governance. As Almond and Verba (1963) assert, understanding political culture is essential for appreciating variations and stability in political systems, both democratic and non-democratic. Political culture functions as a bridge between individuals and their behavior, providing a crucial framework for analyzing their socio-political attitudes. This interplay is particularly significant in educational institutions which act as incubators for democratic attitudes, civic knowledge, and

political participation (Longo & Meyer, 2006; Glaeser et al., 2007)

Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST), located in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), provides a compelling context to examine political culture and democratic attitudes. Situated in a region characterized by complex and underexplored political dynamics, it represents a cross-section of AJK's diverse population. With its wider range of academic programs and varied demographics, it offers an untapped opportunity to explore how political and democratic values are shaped and transmitted within an academic community of AJK.

This study aims to evaluate the political culture at MUST by analyzing levels of political engagement, acceptance of constitutional and democratic values, democratic attitudes, and trust in institutions. As an exploratory effort, it seeks to address the lack of empirical research on AJK's academic community, offering a first glimpse into the political culture of this unique region. By investigating these crucial variables, the study contributes to the broader discourse on democracy and political participation, providing insights into a region that has been largely underrepresented in academic and policy discussions.

Significance of the Study

While prior research has extensively examined political culture and democratic attitudes in global, regional, and national (Pakistan) contexts, studies specifically focusing on AJK or its academic community remain scarce. This study addresses this gap by emphasizing the critical role of universities in fostering democratic values and practices. Given the socio-political challenges unique to AJK, understanding political engagement within its academic community offers valuable insights that can inform strategies to promote democratic development and civic participation.

These findings contribute to the broader literature on political culture and democracy by offering a localized perspective and suggesting practical interventions for enhancing democratic engagement. They also provide a foundation for future comparative studies involving similar regions or institutions.

Research Objectives, Questions, and Hypotheses

The primary aim of this study is to explore and evaluate political culture and democratic attitudes among students and faculty members at Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST). Specifically, the study seeks to determine what type of political culture—participatory, subject, or parochial—characterizes the academic community in AJK. This broader objective translates into the following key research questions:

1. What is the level of political engagement among respondents at MUST?

2. To what extent do respondents accept democratic values and attitudes?

3. What is the level of trust in political institutions among respondents?

Based on these research questions the study examines the following hypotheses:

H1: There are significant differences in the level of political engagement based on demographic variables such as gender, age, faculty, and field of study.

H2: There are significant differences in the acceptance of constitutional democratic values based on demographic variables such as gender, age, faculty, and field of study.

H3: There are significant differences in trust in institutions, based on demographic variables such as gender, age, faculty, and field of study.

Literature Review

Political culture encompasses the attitudes, values, beliefs, and emotional orientations that individuals and groups hold toward political systems and processes (Almond & Verba, 1963; Pye, 1966). It is traditionally divided into three components: cognitive (knowledge and understanding of political systems), affective (emotional attachments to political entities), and evaluative (judgments and opinions about political performance). These components collectively shape how individuals engage with and perceive their political environment. Scholars further categorize political culture into participatory, subject, and parochial types. A participatory culture is characterized by active civic involvement, where citizens are well-informed, engage in public discourse, and exercise their rights through active political participation.

In contrast, a subject culture reflects passive compliance with political authority, where citizens are aware of the political system but remain disengaged or deferential, often due to constraints imposed by authoritarian governance or societal norms. Lastly, a parochial culture denotes limited awareness or interaction with national politics, with individuals focusing on local or immediate concerns, often found in traditional or underdeveloped societies. Studies on hybrid regimes suggest that political culture in such contexts often reflects a mix of subject,

parochial, and participatory elements, shaped by the coexistence of democratic structures and authoritarian constraints (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Hawkins, 2010). In AJK, as a hybrid political system, it is plausible to find a similarly fragmented political culture, requiring empirical research to confirm these dynamics.

While Almond and Verba's Civic Culture (1963) remains a foundational work, numerous studies have explored political culture and its impact on democratic attitudes across different contexts. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) linked shifts in cultural values to democratization processes, emphasizing that societal values play a pivotal role in shaping democratic norms. Norris (2011) expanded on how trust in institutions underpins democratic stability, linking high trust levels with stronger civic participation and low trust with political disengagement and backsliding. Education institutions have also been identified as key spaces for fostering civic values and democratic engagement. Glaeser et al., (2007), for instance, argued that education significantly enhances individuals' acceptance of democratic values, such as equality, freedom of expression, and accountability. Cook and Nation (2016) also underscored the role of civic education in enhancing political engagement.

Globally, education institutions are recognized as critical platforms for nurturing democratic norms and fostering civic engagement (Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). As intellectual hubs, higher education institutions serve as spaces where individuals are exposed to diverse perspectives, enabling the development of informed political opinions and active civic participation. Tierney (2021) emphasized that universities provide spaces for pluralistic debates and participatory practices, enhancing the democratic potential of student populations. Faculty members, in particular, act as role models, integrating democratic principles into curricula and encouraging students to engage with political processes (Bergmark & Westman, 2016). However, political culture in universities is not homogenous. Factors such as gender, age, faculty affiliation, and academic roles significantly influence political engagement and attitudes

(Dalton, 2008; Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Gender disparities in political participation often reflect broader societal norms, while generational differences influence levels of trust in institutions and acceptance of democratic values (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

In South Asia, political culture is shaped by the region's historical and socio-political contexts. Mitra & Waha, (2016) provide a comprehensive overview and coexistence of participatory, subject, and parochial political cultures in South Asia. In India, participatory political culture has developed more prominently due to consistent democratic governance, where legal and political institutions have facilitated civic engagement by transforming traditional identities into politicized entities. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, political culture is more subject-oriented, influenced by interrupted democracies, military dominance, and debates over the role of religion in governance, leading to limited civic participation. Shafqat (1990), and Akhter et al., (2012) earlier identified a similar tension, emphasizing the disharmony between Pakistan's democratic aspirations and autocratic governance, rooted in institutional weaknesses, elite-driven politics, and the military's entrenched role in political life.

Besides institutional factors, scholars have also identified ideological factors like religion as one of the factors shaping political culture in Muslim countries. Tessler (2002), for instance, highlighted the interplay of religion and education in shaping democratic attitudes in Muslim-majority societies, emphasizing how governance models influence civic engagement. Khaliq (2019; 2024) also focused on the dual role of educational institutions in Muslim societies, particularly in Pakistan and Indonesia, as spaces for both traditional socialization and modernist reform, reflecting the tensions between continuity and change in political culture. Jamal (2006) also emphasized the role of higher education and religion in explaining the support for democracy in places like Egypt and Jordan.

The political culture of Pakistan is deeply intertwined with public trust in its institutions and the civic education provided to its youth, both of which shape societal stability and governance effectiveness. Yosuf and Nauman (2015)

highlight a pervasive crisis of confidence in major institutions, with the military being the only entity enjoying significant public trust. Their study, conducted in Lahore, revealed widespread distrust in the federal and provincial governments, judiciary, police, and political parties, citing corruption, political interference, and inefficiency as primary reasons. In comparison, Perveen et al. (2020) focus on the perceptions of university students in Punjab, finding a similar pattern of institutional trust, with the military ranking highest and police and parliament perceived as the least trustworthy institutions.

In the context of Pakistan's political culture and education system, studies on different educational frameworks reveal shared limitations in fostering critical civic engagement. Ahmad (2008) emphasized that national school curricula, steeped in an Islamic model, focus on moral and ethical development but neglect critical thinking and democratic competencies. Similarly, Rauf et al. (2024) found that elite schools, despite their access to greater resources, exhibit similar shortcomings in local curricula, with textbooks prioritizing rote memorization over higher-order thinking skills. On the other hand, Kataria and Javaid (2017) explored madrasa education and found that it serves as a mechanism for political socialization, instilling Islamic values and beliefs while shaping perceptions about political efficacy. However, political efficacy among madrasa students diminishes with age and higher educational levels, reflecting systemic issues that inhibit a comprehensive understanding of participatory governance. Similar observation regarding higher education institutions, madrasas, and civic education have been noted by Khaliq (2019) in the context of Indonesia and Pakistan. These findings collectively highlight that across different educational tiers—local schools, elite institutions, and madrasas—there is a persistent failure to adequately prepare students for meaningful civic and political participation, suggesting the need for reform across Pakistan's educational spectrum

Where this review underscores the pivotal role of education and educational institutions in shaping political culture across varied contexts, it also reveals the gap in understanding AJK political

culture and the role of its higher education institutions in addressing democratic challenges unique to this region. This study addresses the gap in existing literature by examining the interplay of political culture and democratic attitudes within university settings, contributing to a deeper understanding of how educational institutions shape political behaviors and values.

Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory survey design to investigate political culture and democratic attitudes among students and faculty at MUST (McNabb, 2015; Creswell, 2020). A correlational approach was employed to examine the relationships between political engagement, acceptance of constitutional democratic values, democratic attitudes, and trust in institutions.

Population and Sampling: The target population consisted of approximately 9,000 students and 500 faculty members across 43 departments at MUST. Using a multi-stage sampling technique, 304 respondents were selected, comprising 191 students (62.8%) and 113 faculty members (37.2%). The sample size was selected at 95% confidence level and 5% Margin of error to ensure representativeness and reliability. The demographic characteristics of sample show a higher proportion of males (64.1%) than females (35.9%). The majority of respondents were in the 18–24 age group (59.2%), followed by 25–44 years (36.2%) and those aged 45 and above (4.6%). Participants represented diverse academic faculties, including Engineering (30.4%), Natural and Applied Sciences (20.9%), Social Sciences and Humanities (21.5%), Health and Medical Sciences (8.4%), and Business School (18.8%). Stratified sampling was employed in the first stage by categorizing departments into faculty-based strata, including Engineering, Natural and Applied Sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities, Health Sciences, and the Business School. Respondents were proportionally selected based on the size of each department within these faculties. In the second stage, participants within each stratum were selected using random sampling.

Justification for Demographic Variables: The study examines key demographic variables to understand their influence on political culture. Gender differences in political engagement, often shaped by societal norms and expectations, have been well-documented (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Age is another critical factor, as generational differences influence political attitudes, with younger individuals typically exhibiting lower trust levels but higher political

engagement (Dalton, 2008; Glaeser et al., 2007). Faculty affiliation plays a role in shaping political culture, as academic disciplines expose individuals to diverse political discourses and democratic values (Cook & Nation, 2016). Finally, academic roles contribute to variations in political knowledge and institutional trust, with faculty members generally demonstrating higher levels of both due to their professional experiences (Dee,

2004)

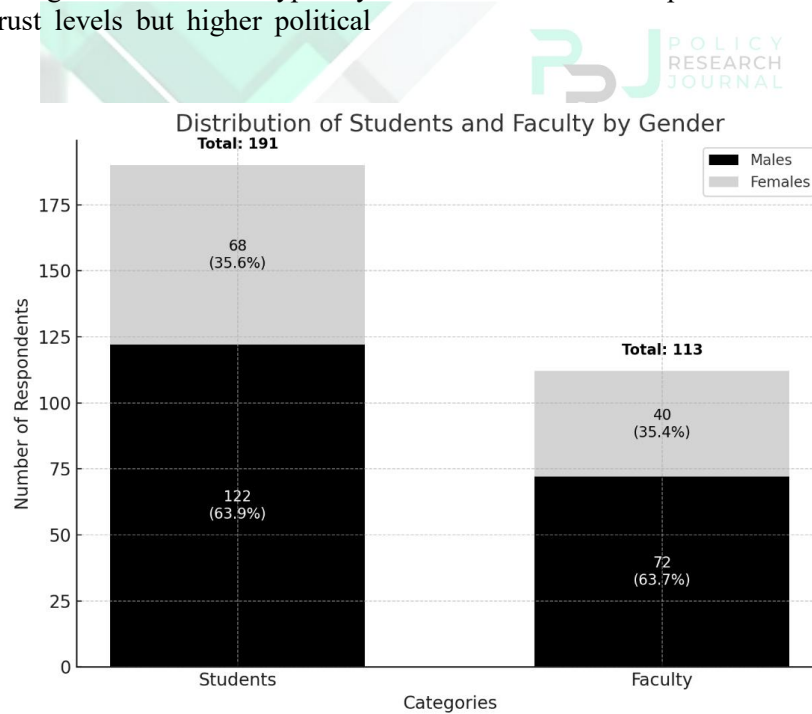


Figure 1: Distribution of Students and Faculty by Gender

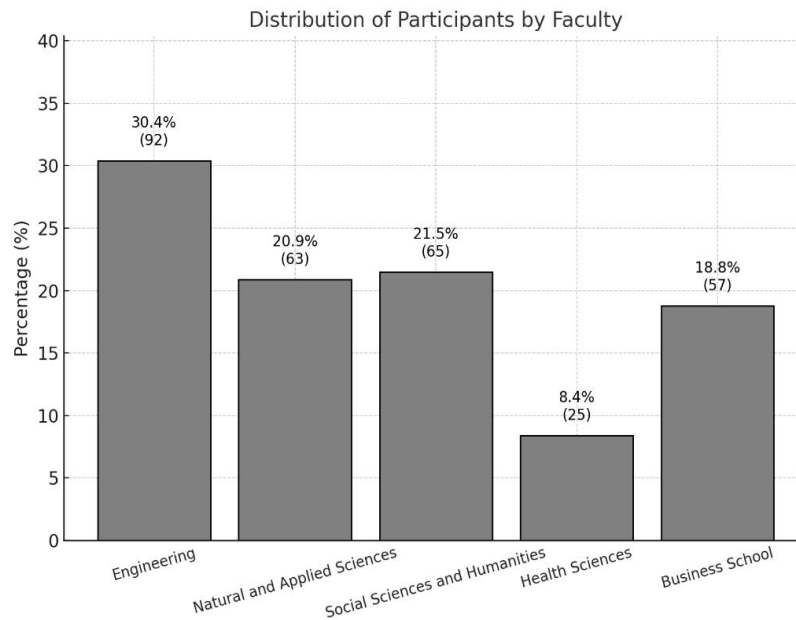


Figure 2: Distribution of Participants by Faculty

Data Collection: Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising closed-ended questions on political engagement, democratic attitudes, and trust in institutions. The questionnaire was pilot-tested to ensure clarity and reliability, achieving a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.74. A total of 455 questionnaires were distributed, and 304 valid responses were analyzed after excluding incomplete submissions. The data was collected during Spring 2023, from March to June.

Data Analysis: The data were analyzed using SPSS (version 21). Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize demographic characteristics, while inferential analyses, including Chi-square tests, explored relationships between variables. Statistical significance was determined at $p < 0.05$.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the detailed analysis of data collected from 304 respondents, comprising students and faculty members at MUST. Using

SPSS Version 21, the study employed descriptive statistics, Chi-square tests, and cross-tabulations to analyze political engagement, acceptance of democratic values, democratic attitudes, and trust in institutions. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of political culture at MUST.

Political Engagement: The study assessed political engagement among participants using the Political Engagement Composite (PEC), a variable categorized into three levels: never engaged, occasionally engaged, and always engaged. This measure was derived from six survey questions exploring participation in political activities, sources of political information, and interest in political parties, local governance, and foreign policy. The analysis revealed significant variations in political engagement across demographic and academic factors. Male respondents demonstrated significantly higher levels of engagement (71.9%) compared to females (28.1%), supporting Hypothesis 1.

Table 1: Political Engagement by Gender

Gender	Never Engaged (%)	Occasionally Engaged (%)	Always Engaged (%)
Male	33.3	50.7	71.9
Female	66.7	49.3	28.1

Engagement also increased with age, as participants aged 45 and above reported 100% "always engaged" ($p = 0.000$). Faculty members demonstrated significantly higher engagement (96.5% "always engaged") compared to students (52.9% "always engaged"), supported by a Chi-Square test ($p = 0.001$). Engagement levels further varied by field of study, with the highest levels observed in Social Sciences (75% "always engaged") and the lowest in Natural and Applied Sciences (27.5% "always engaged," $p = 0.011$). These findings highlight the strong influence of gender, age, academic role, and field of study on participants' political engagement as summarized in Table 5.

These differences align with prior studies suggesting demographic variations in political participation. This finding aligns with cultural theories positing that traditional gender roles and stereotypes limit women's political participation (Almond & Verba, 1963). Similarly, empirical studies in other contexts (Verba et al., 1995) report men's higher political engagement due to greater access to political information and reduced domestic responsibilities. Age-related findings support literature linking education and civic

engagement (Glaeser et al., 2007). Faculty's higher engagement reflects their educational and professional advantages (Dee, 2004). The data also revealed that individuals who actively followed traditional news sources, social media, and local governance updates showed increased levels of engagement.

Constitutional & Democratic Values (CDV):

The study assessed the acceptance of constitutional and democratic values among participants using the Constitutional & Democratic Values (CDV) composite variable. This measure was based on six survey variables exploring attitudes toward human rights, freedom of expression, gender equality, minority rights, pluralism, and free and fair elections. The findings reveal significant demographic variations in the endorsement of these values. Males were more likely (90.6%) than females (66.7%) to consider CDV as "very important" ($p = 0.007$). Faculty members unanimously endorsed CDV as "very important" (100%), compared to students (90.6%) ($p = 0.001$).

Table 2: Acceptance of Democratic Values

Academic Role	Very Important (%)	Not Important (%)
Faculty	100.0	0.0
Students	90.6	9.4

Age also emerged as a significant factor, with older participants (45+) unanimously endorsing CDV as "very important" (100%) compared to slightly lower agreement among younger participants aged 18–24 (91.1%) ($p = 0.029$), confirming Hypothesis 2 that demographic differences influence the acceptance of democratic values.

Besides composite scores, the specific questions on the role of undemocratic forces in governance, such as the military and religious actors, was also telling. The results revealed nuanced perspectives across gender, age, and academic status. For instance, 48% of male respondents agreed that religious actors should interpret the law, while a higher proportion of women (60%) agreed that religion holds authority, with a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.002$). Similarly,

faculty and students demonstrated comparable agreement levels on this issue, with 53% and 55%, respectively ($p = 0.003$).

The study also examined opposition to military rule, which remained consistent across academic roles, with only 17% of both students and faculty agreeing that the military should occasionally take over civilian governments ($p = 0.000$). This suggests a growing preference for participatory governance, aligning with global democratic trends. However, there was notable gender-based inconsistency on this issue, as 26% of females agreed with military intervention compared to only 11% of males ($p = 0.001$). These findings underscore complex variations in democratic attitudes based on gender, age, and academic roles (as shown in Table 5), reflecting broader trends in political values and governance preferences.

Table 3: Attitudes Toward Military Involvement

Attitude	Males (%)	Females (%)
Oppose Military Rule	88.4	73.9
Support Military Rule	11.6	26.1

Trust in Institutions: The study measured trust in institutions through survey questions evaluating participants' trust in political parties, government, parliament, police, press, army, and judiciary. While individual responses were insightful, the variables were combined into a composite scale (distrust, moderate trust, complete trust) to provide a holistic view. The findings reveal significant variations in trust levels based on demographic factors, supporting Hypothesis 3 that trust in institutions varies significantly by these factors.

Trust in the judiciary displayed consistently high levels across gender and academic roles. Male respondents reported 65.9% trust, and females reported 66% trust, with a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.006$). Similarly, faculty members

showed higher trust in the judiciary (73%) compared to students (62%) ($p = 0.000$). Trust in the army, however, showed more variable patterns. Among males, 46% expressed "no or little trust," compared to 40% of females ($p = 0.025$). The differences between students and faculty were particularly stark: 67% of students expressed "no or little trust" in the army, compared to only 10% of faculty members ($p = 0.000$).

On the composite trust scale, faculty members reported significantly higher overall trust in institutions, with 83.2% expressing moderate trust, compared to students, who demonstrated more polarized opinions. Among students, 27.7% expressed complete trust, while 16.8% reported distrust.

Table 4: Trust in Institutions by Academic Role

Trust Level	Students (%)	Faculty (%)
Complete Trust	27.7	8.0
Moderate Trust	55.5	83.2
Mistrust	16.8	8.8

These findings suggest that faculty members' higher trust levels may stem from greater exposure to institutional processes and governance, whereas students may require targeted trust-building measures, such as transparency and accountability initiatives.

Field of study also influenced institutional trust. Students from Social Sciences and Humanities reported the highest levels of moderate trust

(63.4%), while students from Health and Medical Sciences reported the lowest levels of complete trust (6.2%) ($p = 0.013$). These results emphasize the role of demographic and disciplinary factors in shaping trust in institutions and underscore the need for tailored interventions to enhance trust, particularly among students and specific academic disciplines

Table 5: Summary of Key Findings and Statistical Analysis

Category	Demographic Factor	Key Findings	(p-value)*
Political Engagement (PEC)	Gender	Males show higher engagement (71.9% 'always') compared to females (66.7% 'never')	0.000
	Age	Engagement increases with age: 45+ group reports 100% 'always' participation	0.000
	Status (Faculty/Student)	Faculty are more politically active (96.5% 'always') compared to students (52.9% 'always')	0.001

	Field of Study	Highest engagement in Social Sciences (75% 'always'), lowest in Natural and Applied Sciences (27.5% 'always')	0.011
Constitutional & Democratic Values (CDV)	Gender	Males (90.6 %) are more likely to endorse CDV as 'very important' than females (66.7%)	0.007
	Status (Faculty/Student)	Faculty unanimously endorse CDV as 'very important' (100%) compared to students (90.6%)	0.001
	Age	Older participants (45+) unanimously endorse CDV as 'very important' (100%), while younger participants (18-24) show slightly lower agreement (91.1%)	0.029
Institutional Trust	Status (Faculty/Student)	Faculty reported higher 'moderate trust' (83.2%) compared to students (55.5%), who showed higher 'distrust' (16.8%) and 'complete trust' (27.7%)	0.000
	Field of Study	Students from Social Science and Humanities reported the highest 'moderate trust' (63.4%), while Health and Medical Sciences students reported the lowest 'complete trust' (6.2%)	0.013

*Only statistically significant values ($p < 0.05$) are reported in the table

The results affirm the hypotheses and objectives, demonstrating demographic variations in political engagement, democratic values, attitudes, and trust in institutions. These findings provide actionable insights for promoting a participatory political culture and enhancing democratic values within the university and broader AJK context.

The data demonstrates the coexistence of "Subject" and "Participant" political cultures within the university community. Male faculty members exhibited higher levels of political engagement and trust in institutions compared to their female counterparts and students. Younger respondents showed a greater inclination toward participatory governance and progressive democratic values, highlighting a potential generational shift in political attitudes. These findings underscore the significant role of universities in shaping democratic attitudes and fostering civic participation, particularly in politically underrepresented regions such as AJK.

Results Analysis: Mixed Political Culture at MUST

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the political culture of students and faculty at MUST, situated in the socio-politically unique region of AJK. By examining political engagement, democratic values, and trust in institutions, the findings suggest that a blend of "Subject" and "Participant" political cultures

coexist within this academic community, as theorized by Almond and Verba (1963).

Political Engagement and Participant Culture:

The levels of political engagement at MUST reflect characteristics of a developing "Participant" political culture, particularly among faculty members and older respondents. The findings indicate that faculty members exhibit significantly higher political engagement (96.5% "always engaged") compared to students (52.9%), aligning with literature suggesting that educational and professional advantages foster greater political awareness and activity (Dee, 2004). Similarly, older participants (45+) unanimously reported "always engaged" political activity, highlighting the influence of age-related political socialization and life experience (Dalton, 2008). These trends align with democratic norms, where active political participation underpins civic engagement and governance.

However, the relatively lower engagement among students, particularly in fields like Natural and Applied Sciences (27.5% "always engaged"), suggests that academic focus and limited exposure to political discourse might inhibit full development of participant culture in some segments of the university population. This polarization underscores the need for targeted interventions, such as incorporating civic education and fostering interdisciplinary discussions on governance and political engagement.

Democratic Values and Constitutionalism: The acceptance of constitutional and democratic values (CDV) at MUST is indicative of a positive orientation toward constitutionalism, a hallmark of participant political culture. Faculty members unanimously endorsed CDV as "very important," while male respondents (90.6%) showed higher endorsement levels than females (66.7%). Age also emerged as a factor, with older participants (45+) unanimously supporting CDV compared to younger participants (91.1%). These findings suggest that exposure to professional settings, political information, and generational experiences contribute to the internalization of democratic values.

However, the study also reveals nuances in attitudes toward undemocratic forces, such as the role of the military and religious actors in governance. Although opposition to military rule was generally consistent across faculty and students, a significant portion of females (26%) expressed agreement with military intervention compared to males (11%). Additionally, gendered perspectives on religious authority (60% of females supporting) highlight the enduring influence of cultural norms and traditions in shaping democratic attitudes. These findings suggest that while the university fosters constitutional and democratic norms, elements of subject culture persist, influenced by societal and institutional factors.

Trust in Institutions and Subject Culture: Trust in institutions at MUST reveals a mix of moderate and polarized trust levels, indicating a transition from subject to participant culture. Faculty members displayed higher trust in key institutions, such as the judiciary (73%) and other governance entities, with 83.2% expressing moderate trust overall. This aligns with the hypothesis that professional roles and exposure to institutional processes enhance trust in governance mechanisms (Dee, 2004).

In contrast, students exhibited more polarized trust levels, with 27.7% expressing complete trust and 16.8% demonstrating distrust. Notably, students from Social Sciences and Humanities reported the highest levels of moderate trust (63.4%), while those from Health and Medical

Sciences showed the lowest levels of complete trust (6.2%). These findings suggest that disciplinary exposure to governance-related discourses influences perceptions of institutional reliability. The low trust in the military, particularly among students (67% expressing "no or little trust"), reflects a growing preference for civilian governance and participatory democracy, aligning with national and global democratic trends.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides an in-depth analysis of political culture and democratic attitudes among students and faculty at MUST, AJK. The findings reveal the coexistence of "Subject" and "Participant" political cultures within the university community, highlighting both opportunities and challenges for democratic consolidation in AJK. Variations in political culture are significantly influenced by demographic factors such as gender, age, and academic role, reflecting the diverse experiences and perspectives within the university.

Faculty members, characterized by high levels of political engagement, democratic values, and institutional trust, exemplify a participant political culture, actively contributing to and supporting democratic processes. Conversely, students exhibit a transitional political culture, combining participant and subject orientations shaped by their academic focus, societal norms, and limited exposure to governance structures. This duality positions the university as both a driver of democratic engagement and a mirror of the broader socio-political landscape of AJK.

To strengthen the university's role as a hub for cultivating democratic attitudes and practices, targeted strategies are essential including:

1. Enhancing civic education through curriculum integration can deepen students' understanding of democratic principles and their practical applications.
2. Promoting gender-inclusive engagement, such as leadership training for women, can help reduce gender disparities in political participation.
3. Providing comprehensive religious education that encompasses diverse perspectives, rather than focusing solely on traditional narratives, is

essential for challenging the view that democracy is incompatible with religion and for fostering a balanced understanding of democratic values within a religious context.

Lastly, future research involving comparative studies across multiple universities in AJK and beyond is recommended to generalize findings and explore broader socio-political dynamics. These efforts will contribute to fostering a robust participant culture within the university, thereby supporting democratic consolidation in the region

NOTE

MUST, ranked as the top university in AJK and 20th in Pakistan by THE World University Rankings for 2024, has grown significantly over the past decade. As one of the oldest institutions for engineering and technology in the region, it attracts students from across AJK and Pakistan. With its five faculties, 42 departments, 84 programs, and a student body exceeding 10,000, MUST represents a key hub for academic and cultural exchange in the region.

Scholarly attention to AJK's political dynamics has emerged only recently. Historically, much of the academic and policy focus on the Kashmir conflict has centered on its role as a territorial dispute between India and Pakistan or the politics of Indian-administered Kashmir, with little exploration of AJK's internal governance and democratic challenges (Lamb, 1991; Bose, 2005; Ganguly, 2003; Khaliq, 2010). However, recent scholarship has begun addressing these previously overlooked aspects, particularly AJK's relationship with Pakistan and its internal sociopolitical dynamics (Khaliq, 2012; Snedden, 2012; Hayat, 2020; Hussain, 2021). This present study complements these newer works by providing a grassroots perspective on promoting democracy within AJK.

AJK has come under increasing scrutiny for its deficiencies in democratic governance. According to Freedom House, the region has been classified as 'Not Free' consistently from 2002 with lowest possible political rights score (7) and civil liberties score of 5.

Hybrid in this context refers to a political system that combines characteristics of both democratic and non-democratic systems. It typically signifies

a governance structure where elements of democracy, such as elections or participatory practices, coexist with authoritarian tendencies, such as centralized control or limited political freedoms. AJK's governance system exemplifies this hybridity, as its government and legislative assembly—elected through popular vote—possess limited legislative, administrative, and financial authority compared to the extensive control exercised by Islamabad.

See, for example, Chapter 7: *Citizenship Education in Indonesia and Pakistan* for a detailed discussion on the role of education institutions, madrasas, and civic education in shaping democratic attitudes in both countries

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