

**STUDENT UNIONISM AS A SPRINGBOARD FOR POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHALLENGES
AND PROSPECTS**

ADEGBENRO Olusola Ajani¹

Department of Political Science, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Oyo State

Abstract

This study aimed to examines student unionism as a platform for political participation with emphasis on the challenges and the strategic measures for strengthening student unionism as a platform for political engagement in Nigeria. Student unionism has historically served as an important platform for political socialization, civic engagement, and democratic participation in Nigeria tertiary institutions. The paper makes use of a qualitative approach, using data gathered from secondary sources which was analyzed via content, thematic and historical analysis. This paper will answer research questions like, to what extent does student unionism promote political participation and democratic engagement among university students in Nigeria? What are the challenges facing student unionism in Nigeria? And possible ways of strengthening the student union. The findings reveal that student unions were found to be instrumentally responsible in raising the students' level of political awareness, due to the discourse on governance, rights and responsibilities exposed during activities of the student union. The paper is anchored on Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) a prominent theoretical framework and the study would significantly advances our understanding of political science, especially as it relates to student unionism and political engagement.

Key words: student, students union, political participation, challenges

¹ Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria's political and democratic growth, student unionism plays a significant role. In addition to serving as hubs for academic instruction, universities and other higher education institutions also serve as places where young people can engage with problems of public concern, voice their ideas, organize collectively, and develop leadership abilities. Students take part in elections, discussions, advocacy, negotiations, protests, and other types of collective action through student union societies. Thru these exercises, students are exposed to procedures that are similar to more general political engagement in significant ways. Consequently, student unionism can serve as a training ground through which young people acquire political knowledge, organizational experience, leadership abilities, and a sense of civic responsibility. This makes student unionism particularly relevant to the study of political participation and democratic development in Nigeria.

Student unionism has historically served as an important platform for political socialization, civic engagement, and democratic participation in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. The emergence of student unionism can be traced to the early influence of the West African Students Union (WASU), which championed anticolonial struggles and the emancipation of Africans from colonial subjugation. In Nigeria, this movement gave rise to the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), which was first established at the University of Ibadan and later

transformed into the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), extending its presence across higher institutions nationwide. Student unions, particularly in the post-independence era, functioned not merely as welfare-oriented organizations but as pressure groups influencing national policy and governance. Historically, Nigerian student protests led to the abrogation of the Anglo-Nigeria defence pact in 1962, the "Ali Must Go" protest of 1978 and antistructural adjustment Programme (SAP) demonstrations of the 1980s exemplified student activism aimed at resisting oppressive and exploitative state policies. These activities revealed students' awareness of their civic responsibilities and commitment to democratic values of justice, accountability, and participation.

In recent time, contemporary observations and scholars like Obiagu, machie and Ndubuisi(2023) has shown that student unionism in Nigeria has become impaired, weakened and politicized. According to Wonah (2019) he stated that corruption, partisanship, and institutional manipulation have eroded its once vibrant role as a watchdog of democracy. The infiltration of national political dynamics into campus politics has led to the commodification of leadership positions, electoral malpractices, and the suppression of dissent. Consequently, student unionism today often mirrors the "dirty politics" prevalent in the wider Nigerian polity, thereby reducing its impact on democratic participation and governance.

According to Obiagu, Machie, and Ndbuisi (2023), The issue of political participation continues to be at the center of democratic growth. The study conducted by these researchers, which focuses on the views of university students on democratic values, shows that students are ready to support democracy but they are not willing to participate actively in civic activities such as demonstrations, voting, and other forms of accountability.

Against this background, this study examines student unionism as a springboard for political participation in Nigeria, with particular attention to its challenges and prospects. The study seeks to understand the extent to which participation in student union activities contributes to political awareness, leadership development, civic engagement, and subsequent political participation among Nigerian youths. It also examines the institutional, financial, political, and social factors that may limit the effectiveness of student unionism as a mechanism for political development. By exploring both its challenges and prospects, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on youth political participation, democratic consolidation, and leadership development in Nigeria.

Methodology

The paper makes use of a qualitative approach, using data gathered from secondary sources which was analyzed via content and historical analysis. According to Creswell and Poth,

(2023) qualitative approach is a research strategy that seeks to understand social phenomena through meanings, experiences, and interpretations, rather than by measuring them numerically. It emphasizes depth over breadth, focusing on how people make sense of their social and political realities. Methods of qualitative research includes the following; Interviews, Focus Groups, Participant Observation and Document/Text Analysis.

Conceptual clarification

Students

According to Oladeji (2023), The term students can be explained in different ways depending on the situation and the background. The following are three different ways to explained the term student.

1. Students as learners: In this situation, students are seen as an individual who are involved in the process of learning. According to Kuh et'al (2006). They are typically enrolled in formal educational programs, such as schools, colleges, and universities, where they acquire knowledge, skills, and competencies that are relevant to their future careers and personal growth.
2. Students as social actors: In this context, students are seen as members of a social group that is defined by shared experiences, interests, and values. They are often organized into student groups, clubs, or associations that provide opportunities for socializing, networking, and advocacy. As social actors, students can have a significant

impact on their communities, both on and off campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

3. Students as consumers: In this context, students are seen as consumers of educational services who make decisions based on a variety of factors, including cost, quality, and reputation. They are often viewed as a market segment that is targeted by educational institutions, publishers, and other businesses that provide products and services related to education (Stanton, 2017).

Students' Union

Students Union is a student organization present in many colleges, universities and high schools. In most cases, Students' Union is often accorded its own building on the campus. It is committed to effective representation of the students. Thus, the purpose of Students' Union is to represent students both within the institution and externally; including on local, national and even international issues. It is also dedicated to social and organizational activities in a bid to promote robust and healthy academic environment. It should be noted that some Students' Union are politicized organizations to the extent that they serve as a training ground for aspiring politicians. However, Students' Unions generally have similar aims irrespective of the extent of politicization, usually focusing on providing students with facilities, support and services. The main objective of a Students' Union is to solve students problems that can either be related to academic life or have a general political, economic or societal nature. Infact, a Students' Union is expected to impact

positively on its immediate environment by improving their school environment through encouraging social, cultural and other extracurricular event that are happening in the local community.

In Nigeria, Students' Union is a precipitate of the West African Student Union (WASU) which was partly pioneered by some Nigerian students in London. The Solanke and Bankole-Bright led WASU fought for improved welfare for all students in London. Their influence in Nigeria brought about NUNS (National Union of Nigerian Students) which premiered in the University of Ibadan. NUNS now NANS (National Association of Nigerian Students) has its wings spread across all tertiary institutions in Nigeria in the form of SUG's (Student Union Governments). WASU fought the colonial masters for the rights and emancipation of Africans from colonial tutelage. WASU and the Student Union matched on as a platform of change and of informed activism. (Okeke, 2010). It is obvious that Students' Union in Nigeria was not only committed to the welfare of students but also that of the entire citizens of Nigeria. Consequently, the union enjoyed support from radical intellectuals and academia. The union leaders were purely idealist and fire brands. Under the leadership of Segun Okeowo, NUNS became involved in national politics for proper funding of education for Nigerian Students (Okeke, 2010). Nigerian students under NUNS suffered all manners of maltreatment yet remained adamant insisting they are fighting the forces of feudalism, parochialism and tyranny in our political system (Okeke, 2010).

To corroborate the above fact about NUNS, Tanimu Umar (2018:1) noted that Student Unionism in Nigeria was known to be a force to be reckoned with. In the sweet old days students through their unions were known to stand firm in criticizing the injustices of our leaders, thereby, effecting major changes. There were instances when the authorities clashed with students when diplomatic precautions failed to work; the 1978 ABU students riot quickly comes to mind. During the uprising, many students' lives were lost while agitating for the ouster of their education Minister, colonel Ahmadu Ali who incidentally now heads the so-called ruling party, PDP. The "Ali Must Go" riot like many in those days was a landmark achievement by student unionism in Nigeria; it has opened up the eyes of our leaders to the fact that students know their rights and can fight oppression no matter the intimidation. From the foregoing, it is unequivocal that Students' Union in Nigeria was a bastion against the repressive, oppressive, dictatorial and tyrannical tendencies of not only the colonial masters but also the actors of the post-colonial state in Nigeria. It is therefore appropriate to affirm that Students' Unions in Nigeria have acted the role of watch dog in checking the excesses of the colonial and post-colonial authorities. Students Union were then more or less a pressure group whose activities were focused in bringing about better education, good leadership, self-rule and positive change for the people among other things (Goodluck, 2013). It follows that whatever these unions considered unfavourable and unconstitutional, they stood firm and unthreatened in opposing

such and because their course is just, unbiased and honest, they have almost always succeeded in achieving their target objectives (Goodluck, 2013).

Furthermore, Students' Unions in Nigeria have vehemently opposed the official high handedness, despotic and nonchalant attitude of authorities in the various tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The seemingly incessant protests, riots and demonstrations over epileptic power and water supply, arbitrary hike of school fees and the lack or inadequacy of learning aids in our campuses attests to the fact that Students' Unions in Nigeria have become the voice of the "Wretched of the earth" and a force to be reckoned with. It should be regrettably noted that in most cases, these protests, riots and demonstrations have led to the closure of the institutions and the concomitant distortion of academic calendar and the late graduation of Nigerian students. In addition, apart from the epochal "Ali MustGo" riot in 1978, Nigerian students under the aegis of Students' Union spoke with one voice and protested against the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and the riot in the institutions of learning in Nigeria. Most of the students were either maimed or killed in those protests.

Political participation

According to (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) as cited in Oladeji (2023) Political participation refers to the ways in which individuals engage in the political process and exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Putnam (2000) opined that such activities includes; voting, political campaigning, attending rallies or

protests, joining political organizations, and communicating with elected officials. There are various factors that influence political participation, including socio economic status, education level, age, race, and gender (Pattie & Johnston, 2011). Social networks and civic engagement also play a role in shaping political participation (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993). Political participation has significant implications for democracy and governance. It enables citizens to express their preferences and hold elected officials accountable (Dalton, 2008).

Moreover, it promotes social integration, fosters collective action, and enhances civic pride and engagement (Putnam, 2000). The study of political participation draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks, including rational choice theory, social capital theory, and social movement theory (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Putnam, 2000; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993).

Political participation is important in democratic societies. It enables citizens to voice their opinions in the decision making process and to affect public policies. It is important to understand the factors that influence political participation in order to foster democratic engagement and improve the quality of governance.

Forms of Political Participation

The followings are the different forms of political participation by different scholars;

Electoral Participation: In democratic societies like Nigeria, higher voter turnout is often interpreted as an indication of

strong political legitimacy and public trust in governance, while low voter turnout suggests political apathy or lack of interest in the system. Students and young people make up a significant portion of electoral participants. Voting is still the most basic and traditional form of political participation, allowing citizens to influence who governs and what policies are implemented. According to Djumadin (2021), opined that novice voters, often students between the age of 18 to 21, play a very important role in shaping democratic futures as their involvement determines long term forms of participation and civic responsibility.

Party and Campaign Activities: Another way to get involved is through party politics. This means joining a political party, going to demonstrations, making financial contributions to campaigns, and soliciting votes. Since it entails direct interaction with institutional political systems, which Ekman and Amna (2012) categorise as formal political participation. **Petition Activities:** By reaching out to elected officials, writing letters, signing petitions, or consulting with public representatives, citizens can also have an impact on government policy. Technology has expanded the range of participatory channels, as seen by the widespread use of social media and digital platforms by students and young people to petition government actors.

Protest and Extra-Parliamentary Activism: Citizens may participate in protest, demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, collectively which is refers to extra-parliamentary participation, in addition to the

formal mechanisms. These are sometimes described as unconventional but legitimate forms of protest. Legal protests and activism, such as taking part in environmental movements or gender rights campaigns, are indirect ways that citizens can influence policy by raising public awareness and putting pressure on decision makers.

Latent Participation and Civic Engagement: Not all political behaviour takes the form of overt political participation. Latent political participation which is also referred to as dormant political participation includes a variety of civic engagement activities, including community service, volunteering, and social activism. Despite not being overtly political, these activities frequently influence the political networks, attitudes, and consciousness that support democracy. Talking about politics, going to town meetings, giving to charitable causes, or joining non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are a few examples of indirect engagement that promotes civil society.

Digital and Online Participation: New avenues for political participation have been made feasible by the growth of digital media. These days, social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter are utilised for public discussion, advocacy, and mobilisation. According to Djumadin (2021), young voters and students use digital technologies to organise campaigns, spread political messages, and dispel false information. Online activism is a hybrid form that combines contemporary electronic platforms with conventional civic action.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) is a prominent theoretical framework developed by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady (1995) to explain why individuals participate or fail to participate in political activities. The model posits that political participation is largely determined by three key factors: resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks. The theory highlights that individuals are more likely to get involved in political actions when they possess the necessary resources which include time, money and civic skills. The motivation or psychological orientation includes interest, efficacy, sense of civic duty and opportunities provided through networks of recruitment such as social groups, religious organizations, or student unions.

In the application of the theory of Civic Voluntarism Model to students' unionism and political participation, student unions are seen as critical institutions that nurture the following three elements among youth. First, student unions help build resources by providing students with the opportunity to acquire civic and leadership abilities by organising meetings, participating in electioneering processes, managing budgets and engaging in advocacy. Such activities help to build civic competencies in communication, organization, and leadership that are important civic resources that later facilitate broader political participation.

Secondly, the three scholars posit that student unions promote psychological

engagement by generating interest in governance and public affairs. They emphasize that when students participate in campus politics, they learn how to make decisions democratically, negotiate and solve problems collectively, which increases their sense of political efficacy, or the belief that their actions can make a difference. Such exposure often results in heightened sense of civic responsibility and political awareness, which enhances students' participation in the politics of the society when they graduate.

Thirdly, student unions function as recruitment networks that connect students to larger political and social movements. Through interaction with political parties, NGOs, and advocacy groups, student leaders are often mobilized into broader civic and political engagement. Many national politicians in Nigeria, for instance, began their careers in student unions, where they were identified, mentored, and recruited into formal politics.

Historical Evolution of Students Unionism in Nigeria

According to Amobi, P. C. (2018), the evolution of students unionism in Nigeria could be traced to the emergence of higher education in the country. As a matter of fact, some scholars have tended to like its emergence with the establishment of Fourrah Bay College in Sierra Leone which admitted some Nigerian students. Whereas this assertion is contestable, the truth is that the increasing number of Nigerian students then - both in Nigeria and abroad coupled with the incandescent nationalist agitations prepared

the way for the evolution of students' unionism in the Nigeria. The first real significance of the incarnation of students' unionism in Nigeria came in 1925, when Ladipo Solanke, a Nigerian student in London, organized his compatriots from West Africa to form the West African Students Union (WASU). Hence, when the University College Ibadan was established in 1948, the spirit of students' unionism had already been entrenched and institutionalized. In the course of time, other institutions of higher learning were established and thus began the expansion of the frontiers of students' unionism in the country.

The desire by the various autonomous university students' unions to have a common and united platform for expressing their opinions and making their input into the governance process gave birth to the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) in 1956, with Emmanuel Obe as its pioneer national president. Even at this early stage, students unionism in Nigeria was characterized by vigorous and robust debates and contribution to the nationalist agitation. They even contributed in shaping the nationalists' diplomatic initiative. In their various institutions of higher learning, the students' unions strongly resisted the oppression of the colonial school authorities. In point of fact, the students were in the vanguard of nationalist movement and those of them who were involved were deeply articulate, intelligent and dogged in their convictions. Even at the secondary school level at that time, the consciousness of visionary students

unionism was very robust and focused. This explains the violent protests by students of Kings College, Lagos in 1944 against the colonial directive that they should vacate their hostels for military occupation.

In his word, Oladeji, O. R. (2023), opined that, this sustained students' activism continued even after Nigeria has gained her political independence from Britain on October 1 1960. It will be recalled that soon after independence, Nigeria signed a one-sided defence pact with her erstwhile colonial master Britain. This defence pact, known as Anglo-Nigerian Defense Pact was viewed by the organized Nigerian students under the aegis of NUNS as inimical to Nigeria's national interest and they consequently organized large-scale protests across the country to force the Nigerian government out of the pact. The NUNS argued that the pact was an attempt by the then Nigerian government to mortgage the sovereignty of the country. Not minding the series of intimidation and harassments by the Nigerian establishment to abandon the protests, the students continued till it was finally abated. NUNS remained the authentic voice of Nigerian students up to April 1978, when the then military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo proscribed it after a running battle with the students' community over increase in tuition, feeding and accommodation fees in the universities. Incidentally, the banning of NUNS by the government did not deter the students as they quickly regrouped under the banner of the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). The change of name, notwithstanding, NANS was seen by

the government as the reincarnation of the proscribed NUNS and this was why throughout the regime of the military government of Obasanjo, his government never really came to any understanding with the students and never accorded any official recognition to NANS as a legitimate students' organization. But this did not discourage the students. They continued to operate undercover because they were convinced about their historical mission as change agents.

However, with the lifting of ban on partisan politics in 1979, all the then registered political parties made a huge political campaign of lifting the ban on NUNS and giving the students' union official recognition. True to its campaign promises, the Shehu Shagari administration, which succeeded the Obasanjo regime, promptly lifted the ban on the union and recalled all those students who were expelled or dismissed by the defunct military regime. But even this gesture by the government did not bring back the name NUNS. The students carried on under the umbrella of NANS. Students' unionism in Nigeria was to enter into another lull with the emergence of the General Ibrahim Babangida regime in 1985. The students' union vigorously protested the removal of oil subsidy by the government and the regime of Ibrahim Babangida wasted no time in proscribing the association. But it is worthy to note that despite its chequered history of evolution, students' unionism in Nigeria has remained active in the life of the Nigerian state. Perhaps, one thing the students' union in Nigeria has been

unable to achieve is to directly negotiate with the government on behalf of its members primarily because the successive Nigerian governments have refused to have anything to do with organized students' union at the official level. This explains the reason why the regime of Ibrahim Babangida refused to appoint any member of the students union into the Political Bureau, even when other critical segments and groups in the country were represented in the Bureau. Since the emergence of university education in Nigeria, one constant feature of students' unionism has been what Olugabde (1990) referred to as "youthfulness and idealism". According to him, such youthfulness and idealism derive their power from effective organization and targeting by the students. This is basically so because students' activism, according to Anise (1979), finds natural habitat in the halls of the academia. Experience of students' unionism across Nigerian universities has shown that when the climate is conducive and the susceptibility to radicalization is married to a heightened sense of social injustice, educational institutions can actually become breeding grounds for idealistic social reformers and highly committed revolutionaries. In all, students' unionism in Nigeria has come a long way and there are reasons why it has endured across time. The major reason is the commitment of the Nigerian students to a better society where their future can be guaranteed. This mindset is rooted in a long tradition of struggle against injustices which firmed during the struggle against colonialism.

Consequently, it is important to note that Student Unionism in Nigeria not only stood for the welfare of students but also that of the entire citizens. Okeke (2010) noted that it was under the leadership of Segun Okeowo that NUNS became involved in national politics for proper funding of education for Nigerian Students. He further explained that Nigerian students under NUNS suffered all manners of maltreatment but yet remained adamant insisting they were fighting the forces of feudalism, parochialism and tyranny in the government. To elaborate further, (Umar, 2018) opined that Student Unionism in Nigeria was known to be a force to be reckoned with. It was in those days that students through their unions effected major changes by standing firm in their resolutions to criticize the injustice of our leaders. Recalling the 1978 Ahmadou Bello University (ABU) students riot, government authorities clashed with students when diplomatic resolutions failed to work out. To corroborate the above instance, (Wonah, 2019) stated that many students' lives were lost while clamouring for the removal of their education minister, Colonel Ahmadou Ali. The "Ali Must Go" riot of 1978 by ABU students was one of the many achievements of Student Unionism in Nigeria as it made the leaders understand the fact that students know their rights and could fight to defend the rights no matter the level of aggression and intimidation.

In addition, apart from the popular "Ali Must go" riot of 1978, Nigerian students under the auspices of the Student Union Government have protested against the

despotic and nonchalant attitude of authorities in various tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The incessant riots, protests, agitations and peaceful demonstrations over drastic increase of school fees, inadequate water supply, unstable or epileptic power supply and lack of conducive learning environment validates the fact that Student Unions in Nigeria have become “the wailing activists for educational reformation.” This is because in most of these violent protests, agitations, demonstrations and riots, some students are maimed, while some even lose their lives. The popular students’ slogan, “Aluta Continua, Victoria Acerta” expresses the fact that as long as the struggle continues, victory is certain. However, looking into the current state of student unionism in various Nigerian tertiary institutions today, can we complacently boast and boldly say that Nigerian students are still in the struggle for better education? To answer this question, a thorough investigation and review of the overall challenges faced by leadership of student unions, causes of student agitations and imperative solutions towards actualising a proactive student union government will be of vital importance. But before then, a blue print of the responsibilities of an effective or proactive student union will be analyzed.

Selected Incidents Of Students Demonstrations In Nigeria

There have been several cases of student demonstrations/agitations in various Nigerian tertiary institutions over the years. Peter and Ebimobowei (2015) noted that some of these incidences have resulted in violence leading to destruction of public properties, arrest,

large scale injuries, maiming, expulsion, proscription of union activities, prosecution and imprisonment, rustication and loss of lives. It is quite unfortunate that after these peaceful and violent agitations, students come back to meet the same conditions that triggered the agitations without their demands being addressed. The following incidences of students’ demonstrations have been recorded by Peter and Ebimobowei (2015).

1. In 1960, University of Lagos students clashed among themselves over the removal of a Vice-Chancellor.

2. In 1971, University of Ibadan students demanded the removal of an official in the university.

During the demonstration, tear gas and live ammunitions were used by the police and a student,

Adekunle Adepoju was shot and killed.

3. In 1978, when the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS) demonstrated over the increase of feeding fees from 50 kobo to 150 kobo with placards, the police were drafted with automatic rifles and canisters of teargas. The presence of the police intensified the demonstrations and several students were shot and killed. The news filtered to other universities and the public and it became a nationwide protest.

4. In June 12, 1993 the annulment of the presidential elections that declared M. K. O. Abiola sparked off wide protests among students from different universities.

5. In 1998, student of Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma violently protested due to

cult activities and it resulted in the death of many students.

6. In 2003, the increase in the price of petroleum products sparked up violent protests in most universities and other tertiary institutions across the country.

7. In 2013, during a prolonged Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike that lasted over six months, students across various campuses protested the government's failure to meet the union's demands.

8. In October 2020, thousands of students and youths across Nigeria joined the #EndSARS movement, which protested police brutality, extrajudicial killings, and abuse of power by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The protests began online and quickly spread nationwide, with university students serving as the core organizers.

9. During the prolonged ASUU strike in 2022, Nigerian students again took to the streets under the banner of NANS. They blocked highways and airports (notably the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway and Murtala Muhammed Airport) to pressure the Federal Government to resolve disputes with ASUU. The protests were largely peaceful but disruptive, showcasing students' frustration with repeated disruptions of academic calendars and government neglect of education.

The above mentioned cases are just a few on the numerous incidences of student demonstrations in various tertiary institutions across the country. As earlier mentioned, students have protested for different reasons and many casualties were recorded. It only takes a proactive student union government to avoid these incidences by devising different

strategies to achieve success in their various unions.

Student Unionism as a Driver of Political Engagement and National Development in Nigeria

Student unionism in Nigeria occupies a unique position in the political and social development of the country. It functions not only as a microcosm of the national political structure but also as a vital instrument of civic education, mobilization, and democratization. Student unions increase young political participation and civic engagement by acting as training grounds for democratic citizenship through a unified representation and advocacy. Student union is a very important agent of political socialisation, which is an important process by which the young citizens acquire knowledge, attitudes and values about governance and participation. Oladeji (2023) explains that higher education institutions in Nigeria are laboratories for democratic learning where students are socialised to norms of representation, deliberation, and accountability. Campus elections and union governance enable students to experience the electoral process, learn about political rights and develop a sense of civic responsibility. These encounters educate students for active participation in mainstream politics after graduation and reflect the broader democratic system. Civic engagement, according to Ekman and Amna (2012), includes both overt and covert types of political activity, from direct participation in elections or protests to covert actions like information sharing,

volunteering, and advocacy. By fusing formal political processes such as elections and policy advocacy with unofficial, pre-political activities such as debates, awareness campaigns, or peer mobilisation, student unions exemplify these dual dimensions. Therefore, student unionism helps young people acquire the skills, self assurance, and civic consciousness that make political engagement more accessible and long lasting.

According to Olaifa (2014) he explains that student unionism is a platform for Leadership Training and Democratic Representation. He opined that students unions is a democratic institutions within the academic community structured to represent the interests of students and negotiate with university management on crucial issues affecting their welfare. These unions replicate the structure of national government with executive arms, legislative councils, and judicial committees providing students firsthand experience in democratic leadership. This structured participation help to build leadership capacity, negotiation skills, and policy literacy, which are important for effective citizenship and subsequent national political involvement. Oladeji (2023) adds that students are exposed to the mechanics of representation and governance through processes like student government elections, involvement in campus decision-making bodies, and association membership. This hands-on education cultivates political awareness and produces future leaders who comprehend the rights and obligations that come with participating in democracy. Therefore, student unionism fosters the next

generation of politically engaged individuals and acts as a springboard for national political leadership.

Oladeji (2023) research reveals that student unions in Nigeria have played a very important role in national political mobilisation. Student bodies have been the conscience of the nation from the founding of the Nigerian Youth Movement in the 1930s to the “Ali Must Go” protests of 1978, challenging oppression, corruption and misgovernance. These movements are not confined to campuses alone but are shaped by national conversations, connecting youth activism to wider democratic struggles. The advocacy role of student unions promotes political awareness among peers, spurs public debate and urges authorities to react to popular demands. Such protest-oriented activism is, according to Ekman and Amna (2012), an important form of extra-parliamentary participation, where citizens try to influence decision-making outside formal political institutions. Thus, student unionism broadens the concept of political participation beyond electoral engagement to include advocacy, social movements, and civic campaigns. These processes increase the inclusiveness and responsiveness of the political system by amplifying youth voices that are often excluded from mainstream governance.

According to Olaifa (2014) he posited that student union acts as instrument for policy discussion and institutional accountability by offering official channels for communication between citizens and

institutional authorities, student unions help promote political engagement. These unions act as intermediary organisations that support transparency and accountability in higher education. Student leaders engage in participatory governance by bargaining with management on matters like fees, welfare, and academic freedom. They also serve as role models for the fundamental democratic values of accountability and policy discourse. This institutional involvement is evidence of the participatory frameworks of national governance, where interest groups and civic associations act as constraints on government action. In this way, student unionism contributes to the production of participatory democracy in the microcosm of the university system and reproduces habits of engagement that spill over into the national political arena.

Challenges Facing Student Unionism in Nigeria

Ugwunali (2023) observes that, one of the challenges facing student unionism is political Interference and Institutional Control. The interference of university authorities and government in union affairs cannot be ignored as it affects the progress of student union. As Ugwunali (2023) observes that management of universities often influence student elections by sponsoring what we called anointed candidates who are likely to act as proxies rather than independent leaders. This practice erodes democratic values within the unions and discourages genuine involvement and participation among students. On many occasions, student union elections are rigged

and opposing voices are silenced through intimidation or proscription of the unions. Oluoch-Suleh and Osuji (2024) further note that this type of interference represents part of a broader neo-corporatist model of student representation in African universities in which governments acknowledge student associations but retain the ability to exert indirect influence over their activities and financing. This corporatist tendency undermines union autonomy, leading to dependence on institutional authorities and a compromised ability to advocate effectively for students' interests.

Ugwunali explains that a second major challenge is financial mismanagement and corruption among student union leaders. Many who involved deeply in politics are driven by selfish interests and personal gain thereby taking advantage of their positions as opportunities for enrichment rather than service. Misappropriation of union funds is another major challenge undermining the credibility of student union body. Osuji (2024) also reports how university administrations sometimes institutionalise corruption by encouraging loyalty through financial rewards, special accommodation or travel allowances for student leaders. These perks separate leaders from the general student body and turn unions into bureaucratic appendages rather than democratic bodies.

Ugwunali (2023) further posits that ethnic and religious sentiments are a big threat to the unity of student unions. Ostracism and marginalisation of competent

contestants in elections because of tribal or religious connections. This trend not only divides the student body but also diminishes the collective bargaining power of unions. Oluoch-Suleh and Osuji (2024) build on this argument by showing that tribalism and political party affiliations have seeped into university campuses, especially in Nigeria and Kenya. Student elections are often partisan contests, and can be manipulated by national political actors seeking to expand their influence. Hence, student unionism becomes a mirror of national political dysfunction rather than a space for democratic learning and civic engagement.

Another challenge that Oluoch-Suleh and Osuji (2024) noted is lack of autonomy and suppression of student activism. The curtailment of freedom of association and expression is still a major issue. Several Nigerian universities have suspended or proscribed student unions for protesting against fee hikes or poor welfare conditions. As Ugwunali (2023) observed, government and university authorities tend to see activism as a threat to order rather than a form of participatory governance. This view is supported by Oluoch-Suleh and Osuji (2024) who state that students in Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda and Zimbabwe are at risk of expulsion or persecution for advocacy". The suppression of dissent diminishes the educative role of unionism as a training ground for democratic leadership and civic responsibility.

Ugwunali (2023) and Oluoch-Suleh and Osuji (2024) establishes that Poor

Welfare and Academic Infrastructure: Poor learning environments and poor welfare provisions often lead to unrest .Students suffer erratic power supply, poor water supply, overcrowded hostels and lack of adequate lecture halls. And when unions try to tackle these problems, they're often ignored or crushed by authorities. This neglect breeds frustration and sometimes violent protest, which in turn further mars the image of the student movement. The chronic underfunding of education identified by Jega (2003) as cited by Ugwunali (2023) remains a structural cause of these problems and limits the capacity of the unions to advocate effectively. Oluoch Suleh and Osuji (2024) further observed that students are most often addressed as troublemakers rather than stakeholders and their complaints are dismissed instead of being addressed constructively. Repression of student activism has resulted in violence, casualties and closures of institutions. Student activism has a history of being met with excessive force, from the Ali Must Go riots of 1978 to the recent protests against fee hikes. Unions are turned into symbolic rather than functional entities and this climate of fear discourages political participation among students.

There are also a number of challenges that inhibit the full potential of students unionism in Nigeria to improve political participation. Olaifa (2014) enumerates problems such as commercialisation of union politics, internal factionalism, administrative interference and political repression. Likewise, Oladeji (2023) observes that the effectiveness and

independence of student unions are often compromised by the influence of partisan politics, inadequate civic education, and limited resources. In response to these challenges, scholars call for institutional reforms that expand student agency, promote civic education and forge partnerships among government agencies, civil society and unions. The advent of modern communication technologies and social media has widened and increased the scope of student activism. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have become a tool for political mobilisation allowing students to participate in national discourses and movements such as EndSARS Oladeji (2023). These developments align with the concept of latent participation by Ekman and Amna (2012) where online participation is a building block for democratic engagement and physical activism. Students unions are important for both education and political mobilisation. They may be used for political mobilisation without putting them in danger because they are the most engaged group in society. This is how the unions may be used to constructively influence our political evolution. Also, this will enhance the nation political socialisation and culture. Therefore, responsible leadership at all levels of society including the university community and a high-quality, rich education are necessary for students to actively contribute to nation-building and strengthen the political culture. For example, when creating regulations that impact students, they should be included rather than left out.

In Nigerian politics, the process of consolidating democracy is still ongoing

because students are the foundation of democratic political mobilisation, the role of student unionism in this regard is consequently extremely important. Truth, integrity, justice, fairness, and equality are at the heart of the democratic spirit. Constructive student union engagement and the growth of the political sphere can help realise these goals. As a result, student unionism has a reciprocal connection. Thus, the democratic space and their inclusion in the policy and decision-making process serve as the foundation of student unionism. If student unionism is to be regarded seriously, student unions should endeavour to eradicate all forms of violence, cultism, and drug addiction from the university community.

Findings and Recommendations

Findings reveal that student unions were found to be instrumentally responsible in raising the students' level of political awareness, due to the discourse on governance, rights and responsibilities exposed during activities of the student union. This was followed by the aspect that student union activities enhance the leadership qualities of student, where they obtain practical skills such as effective communication, organization, and management decision skills.

But despite the significant positive contributions of student unions, there were identified hindrances towards their success, such as student apathy or less student involvement in their activities, interference of administrators, financial constraint of the

student union and political indifference among students. Via process tracing, a direct causality has been drawn between student unionism activities which culminate to discourse that promote greater level of political awareness among students, build their capacity as leader and eventually increase the extent to which students actively engage themselves in political processes. Moreover, these findings correspond with the qualitative findings and thus offer some explanations for why and how student unionism is effective in stimulating greater participation of students into politics regardless of the difficulties they faced. If the student unions are given the opportunity to operate with limited interference, there is higher possibilities of serving as a vibrant platform for political engagement.

Through awareness campaigns and inclusive programs, universities and student unions should put plans into place to promote broader student participation in union operations and to enable student unions to set up successful political and leadership development initiatives, sufficient funding should be made available. Student unions should be given more freedom to function autonomously while still being held accountable by university administrators.

Another recommendation is that to increase student leaders effectiveness, regular training and capacity building initiatives should be set up and should use digital platforms and efficient communication tactics. Also, to advance political awareness

initiatives, cooperation with outside groups should be encouraged.

REFERENCE

- Dalton, R. J. (2008). *Citizenship norms and the expansion of political participation*. *Political Studies*, 56(1), 76–98.
- Goodluck, E. I. (2013). *Students' Union Government: A tool for demonstrating true democratic values*. Paper presented at the 2013 Legal Day Celebration of the Student Union Government (SUG) Judiciary Council.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature*. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.
- McAdam, D., & Paulsen, R. (1993). *Specifying the relationship between social ties and activism*. *American Journal of Sociology*, 99(3), 640–667.
- Obiagu, A. N., Machie, C. U., & Ndubuisi, N. F. (2023). *Students' attitudes towards political participation and democratic values in Nigeria: Critical democracy education implications*. *Canadian Journal of Family and Youth*, 15(1), 14–32.
- Oladeji, O. R. (2023). *Students' activism and political participation*

(Undergraduate thesis). University of Ibadan.

- Oluoch-Suleh, E. A., & Osuji, G. E. (2024). *Student governance and activism in African universities: Examining the role of hidden curriculum and shared responsibility in societal transformation. Global Journal of Education and Learning*, 12(4), 1–14.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.*
- Stanton, T. K. (2017). *The student as consumer: Market-mediated learning and the commodification of higher education. London: Routledge.*
- Tanimu Umar, U. (2018). *The derailment of student unionism in Nigeria.*
- Ugwunali, Y. C. (2023). *Student unionism and leadership in Nigerian tertiary institutions: Challenges and the way forward. SSRN.*
- Wonah, E. I. (2019). *Students' union and politics in Nigeria. Quest Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, 7(7), 28–32