

## **Between Civic Duty, Social Pressure, and Candidate Evaluation: Negotiating Democratic Citizenship through Student Voting Behaviour in Higher Education**

Aosangla Longkumer<sup>1</sup>, Dr Medongolie Zatsu<sup>2</sup> and Lashili G. Chishi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Kohima College, Kohima, Nagaland

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor. Department of Economics, Kohima College, Kohima: Nagaland

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Kohima College, Kohima, Nagaland

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i07.004 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i07.004>

Received: 9 June 2025 / Accepted: 3 July 2026 / Published: 11 July 2026

### **ABSTRACT**

*Student body elections provide an important setting for examining how democratic citizenship is experienced and negotiated in higher education. Drawing on the integrative framework proposed by Antunes (2010), this study examines how the sociological influences, the psychosocial orientations, and the rational evaluations interact and negotiate throughout the electoral decision-making process in the context of Kohima, Nagaland. A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining survey data from 692 respondents across 11 colleges selected through stratified random sampling, along with qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that student voting behaviour cannot be explained through democratic values, social influences, or rational evaluation of candidates in isolation. Rather, students encountered elections through socially embedded relationships, interpreted these experiences through the lens of democratic values, and ultimately shaped what appeared to be reasoned evaluations of candidates before making electoral decisions. These findings provide an empirical extension for Antunes' (2010) premise that the sociological, psychosocial, and rational-choice perspectives operate in continuous interaction to explain voting behaviour in nonpartisan student elections. This study contributes to the limited literature on student electoral politics in Nagaland by demonstrating that elections function as a microcosm of democratic citizenship in which social obligations, democratic values, and candidate evaluation are continuously evaluated.*

**Keywords:** Student Elections, Voting Behavior, Higher Education, Youth Political Behavior, Political Socialisation

## **Introduction**

Voting behaviour, whether in large-scale national elections or the modest arena of campus electoral polls, represents a critical convergence of not just individual agency but also collective choice. In the case of students' elections within the campus, it provides an illuminating ecosystem of democracy where young citizens step in to negotiate between the competing pressures of individual identity, political ideals, and ethics. Across the world, scholars have understood that elections both mirror and deviate from national political life, often amplifying local dynamics of peer influence, community identity and charismatic leadership (Banerjee, 2019; Bekker et al., 2022).

Research on voting behaviour has typically focused on electoral arenas of the state or national level. Classical explanations have emerged from three major theoretical traditions – the sociological, psychosocial, and rational-choice approaches. As synthesised by Antunes (2010), the sociological model lays emphasis on the influence of structural factors like class, religion and ethnicity on voting. The psychosocial model emphasises the importance of partisan identification and psychological connections as key factors in understanding voting behaviour. The rational choice model, in contrast, views voting as a strategic decision aimed at maximising personal benefits – meaning that individuals weigh the pros and cons before casting their votes. Contemporary scholarship (Antunes, 2010) sees the integration of all three models as a complementary and holistic approach to electoral behaviour.

In the global arena, studies on youth political participation have focused beyond campus-specific contexts and have shown how ambivalent attitudes are often portrayed towards democratic institutions. Research conducted in South Africa (Bekker et al., 2022), Mongolia (Mandakh et al., 2024), and India (Bhattacharya, 2024) has demonstrated that youth participation is not only triggered by notions of civic responsibility or political awareness but also in relation to peer networks, social identity, and perceptions of trust and fairness. These findings thus highlight how youth electoral participation goes beyond the ideological or rational and into the realm of constant negotiation between personal values and social obligations.

Within India, research has examined electoral behaviour in connection to caste, religion, community, language and political mobilisation (Banerjee, 2019; Hazarika, 2015). However, there is limited research that closely examines undergraduate students and their electoral patterns within the microcosm of their campus electoral setting. Existing studies have primarily focused on larger electoral institutions or student politics in major universities. Thus, there remains limited understanding of how students vote in peripheral and culturally distinct settings that engage with democratic processes—one that becomes a point of entry towards navigating larger democratic institutions.

In Nagaland, despite a growing body of work on Naga political institutions (Wouters, J.J.P., 2014) and electoral processes in relation to identity politics (Amer, 2009), sparse empirical studies remain with regard to voters of a micro-level subject like “Naga undergraduate voters” and, within that, the specific arena of student electoral participation within educational institutions. This provides a unique context for analysing how students participate electorally as modern institutions coexist with networks of kinship, tribe and community. Thus, electoral decisions are not only shaped by individual preferences but also through social expectations and obligations within the community. Understanding student voting behaviour in this context brings an opportunity to understand not only how democratic participation is experienced in the educational setting but also how democratic values, social relationships and candidate evaluations interact within this electoral environment.

Additionally, higher education institutes in the district of Kohima become a thriving academic milieu that hosts institutions with diverse student bodies. This becomes a rich source of investigation as college campuses serve as a microcosm of mainstream society where competing influences ranging from family and peer groups to hostel communities, cultural organisations and democratic ideas arise. This delivers an avenue for examining how young voters balance personal principles with communal expectations.

Drawing upon data from a mixed-method approach – whereby survey responses were gathered from 692 respondents across 11 colleges in Kohima District, along with qualitative interview evidence – the study explores the relative salience of political beliefs, candidate characteristics, peer networks and socio-cultural affiliation on electoral decision-making. An integrative approach was adopted that combined social, psychosocial and rational choice approaches to understand how democratic values, social influence and candidate evaluation shape electoral decision-making.

The study therefore addresses the following question: How do psychosocial, social and rational choice influences interact to shape the voting behaviour of undergraduate students in student elections? In this study the three dimensions are operationalised through democratic values, social networks and obligations, and candidate evaluation accordingly.

The study argues that students do not make decisions in isolation of democratic ideals, social obligations or candidate evaluations but rather, they do so through the continuous interaction of these dimensions. In doing so, the study provides empirical support for Antunes’ (2010) proposition of seeing these dimensions as being complementary rather than competing explanations of voting behaviour.

This article contributes to the existing body of literature in the following ways: -

1. Provides empirical evidence from a region that has limited studies on youth political participation.
2. Extends the literature on youth political participation by exhibiting the integrated nature of democratic values, social relationships and candidate evaluation throughout the electoral process.
3. Stresses the need to view higher educational institutions as spaces for practicing and negotiating democratic citizenship

The study has implications not only for student governance or the practice of institutional democracy but also pertains to broader discussions concerning political socialisation, youth engagement, and democratic development in societies that are culturally diverse.

## **1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **1.1 Democratic Citizenship and Higher Education**

Institutions of higher education play an important role in preparing young minds to participate in democratic systems. While dissemination of knowledge is a core mission, through underlying systems like student body elections, higher educational institutions also foster ideals of civic duty and critical thought in students. Such elections thus enable students to experience democracy through a representative body, thereby imparting not just knowledge of the collective decision-making process but also negotiation between competing interests. Thus, rather than looking at student elections solely from the perspective of an institutional exercise, it becomes important to look at it as an introductory process to the formation of democratic citizenship.

Watfa and Ait Ali (2025) argue that institutes of higher education strengthen political participation. They highlight how higher institutions, apart from fostering civic responsibility and promoting democracy and rights and duties, also encourage students to enable an environment for engagement in both civic and political life. Moreover, their findings further indicate that higher educational institutions significantly predict the political participation of students, thus showing how these institutions become important sites for observation of processes through which voting behaviour develops among young adults.

### **1.2 Student Elections and Political Socialization**

Political socialisation is a process through which individuals develop their political attitudes and values over time. The agents contributing to the political socialisation process have traditionally been in relation to family, media or community. However, higher educational institutions being studied as part of this process have become increasingly important as they establish themselves as an ecosystem where the young, through participation as leaders or voters in student body

elections, can experience democratic participation hand-in-hand with negotiations between various competing interests.

The exploratory work done by Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya, 2024) delves into the various dimensions of political engagement within educational campuses – such as that of student political involvement, voting behaviour, social media participation and the impact certain incidents have on electoral choices. This highlights how student politics extends beyond just an institutional exercise to include not just campaign participation but also political discussions. Furthermore, students were seen to have developed perceptions regarding election legitimacy, the capabilities of student leaders in grievance redressal and a more profound understanding of the relationship between politics and student life.

Recent comparative research has also broadened the perspective on youth and students. electoral engagement. Bekker, Runciman, and Roberts (2022), examining South African youth, challenged the binary categorisation of young people as either voters or abstainers. Instead, they conceptualised a continuum that includes “loyal voters”, “casual voters”, “party-loyal abstainers” and “consistent abstainers”. This more nuanced model demonstrates that Youth voting is often dynamic and situational rather than static. Their findings are particularly useful for analysing undergraduate student behaviour, where participation may fluctuate depending on civic duty, political interest, peer networks, and institutional environments.

Similarly, Mandakh, Gantulga, and Sampil (2024), studying Mongolian youth, highlighted the strong influence of internal variables such as political interest, political involvement, and political trust, alongside candidate public relations. Contrary to expectations, social media campaigning and candidate image were found to have relatively less impact. This suggests that even within highly digitised youth populations, substantive factors related to trust and engagement carry more weight than superficial or media-driven impressions. Their work reinforces the importance of distinguishing between performative aspects of campaigning and deeper motivational drivers of participation among young voters.

Together, these studies not only highlight how higher educational institutions are an especially important arena for understanding voting behaviour among younger adults, but they also expand the analytical lens beyond campus-specific contexts. They emphasise that while undergraduates form a distinct and important electoral subgroup, their voting behaviour reflects broader global patterns of fluctuating participation, conditional engagement, and the interplay of trust, identity, and personal values.

### **1.3 Theoretical Perspectives on Voting Behaviour**

Research on voting behaviour has historically been viewed through the lens of three major traditions – the sociological model, the psychosocial model and the rational-choice theory. Expanding on the evolution of all three traditions and arguing on the dimensions each tradition explains regarding voting behaviour, Antunes (2010) found that a close study of these three traditions together showed them to be complementary to each other rather than being competing perspectives. According to Antunes, each tradition offered to explain a different dimension of voting behaviour and address the limitations of the preceding approach. In continuation to that, Antunes argues for an integrative framework in which social influences, psychological orientations and rational evaluations operate in tandem throughout the process of electoral decision-making.

According to Antunes (2010), the sociological model began as a systematic explanation of voting behaviour by the Columbia School. The Columbia studies viewed that the voting behaviour of individuals was socially embedded through the influence of characteristics like class, religion, ethnicity, family relationships and community ties, thereby shaping their electoral choices. Antunes (2010) noted that the Columbia School emphasised how voting decisions, rather than being based on individual choices alone, were frequently reflective of the norms and expectations of the social groups to which individuals belonged.

This viewpoint has an impact on understanding student elections as college environments become an area where students form relational webs with each other through friendship groups, hostel communities, student organisations and socio-cultural identification. As Suhay (2015) explains, there seems to be a relationship between political conformity and polarisation. The author saw that social identity and emotions encouraged individuals to conform to group norms and, at the same time, polarised groups in terms of political thought and expression. This evidence, thus, provides an important explanation for why students frequently align their electoral behaviour with the expectations of their social networks. Nevertheless, Antunes (2010) argues that social influences alone can not fully explain electoral behaviour, thus requiring the need for understanding voting behaviour through the psychosocial orientations and rational evaluations.

The psychosocial model, as explained by Antunes (2010), began as a shift in perspective by the Michigan school to understanding voting behaviour by expanding on how the voters' psychological inclination mediated between their social conditions and electoral decisions.

While the sociological model showed that a person's electoral choice was shaped by their social grouping and interpersonal relationships, the Michigan school argued that these social influences

were internalised as psychological orientations by individuals through party identification, which ultimately led to how voters perceived political information – be it in relation to candidates, their issues or campaign messages. Therefore, political information was interpreted psychologically through pre-existing social inclinations rather than through an objective lens alone. As Antunes (2010) would argue, the psychosocial model continued rather than differed from the sociological model, thus explaining how long-term social influences translated to psychological party identification which culminated to immediate electoral behaviour.

Recent empirical evidence also supports the continuing relevance of these psychological factors even when traditional party identification is less evident. Bekker et al. (2022), through their examination of the voting patterns of South African youth, challenged the twofold distinction between voters and abstainers by sequence comprising of loyal voters, casual voters, party-loyal abstainers and consist-abstainers. Their findings propose that even when participation fluctuates across elections, enduring political attachments continue to have influence over electoral behaviour. This point of view further extends on the relevance of the psychosocial model even beyond electoral turnout alone.

Mandakh et al. (2024), in their study of Mongolian youth, similarly found that political interest, involvement and political trust had a stronger influence than media campaigning and candidate image when it came to young voters' electoral choices. This indicates that there were deeper psychological orientations shaping how young voters interpreted campaign information and competing candidates, thus pointing towards the continuous relevance of the psychosocial model in the current electoral context.

The current study, while taking into consideration the psychosocial model, doesn't examine it through the lens of party identification since student elections are largely non-partisan in this context. Instead, it tries to look at it through Antunes' integrative analysis by operationalising it through democratic values where civic duty, political beliefs, political trust and efficacy, and students' perceptions of leadership and representation. These variables capture the internal psychosocial orientations established through long-term social influences which mediate how students interpret campaigns and the candidates and ultimately shape what appears to be a reasoned evaluation of candidates during the election process.

This being said, these orientations should not be understood as direct equivalents of party identification but rather as a comparable analytical function within the student electoral process. Just as party identification provides individuals with a psychological framework that enables individuals to filter political information and evaluate it, democratic values and civic orientations provide students with an interpretive framework through which they make sense of their

campaign message in a non-partisan setting. Thus, democratic values and civic orientations mediate between socially embedded experiences and their final electoral choices.

The rational-choice model, in Antunes (2010) synthesis, conceptualises voting behaviour by means of analysing how individuals make decisions by evaluating electoral options and seeing which alternative is expected to maximise utility. Thus, voters are seen to actively participate in the electoral process through rational reasoning by comparing candidates based on expected benefits, expected performance, policy positions and likely outcomes before coming to a decision.

However, while it centred individual calculation as the main influence of electoral choice, Antunes (2010) argued that rational choice rarely occurs in isolation and must be seen as one component of the larger framework, as decisions made by individuals are still seen to be backed by social relationships that make the environment in which political decisions are made, and psychological inclinations influence how interpretations of candidates, their campaigns and political issues are made by the voters. Thus, rational choice becomes the culminating element of the electoral process rather than its beginning.

Recent studies continue to support the relevance of such an integrative understanding of rational choice that influences electoral behaviour. Panagopoulos & Wang (2025), through their usage of data spanning across multiple US presidential elections from 2000 to 2016, found that voters compared parties according to how their party policy position matched their own. However, emotional evaluations were also considered and shown to be even more effective in swaying voter choice, thereby suggesting that electoral decisions are shaped by both cognitive evaluations and affective responses. These findings further reinforce Antunes' argument that rational choice theory provides a more holistic understanding of voting behaviour when taking other models into consideration rather than treating it as a standalone model.

Within the microcosm of student elections, rational choice may involve candidate promises, expected reforms and leadership competence. Students may thus support a candidate based on who most effectively represents their interests. However, taking into consideration Antunes' framework, these variables are not treated in isolation but understood as the outcome of the process where social relationships are internalised as psychological orientations that shape the interpretation of campaign interactions, candidate information and interpersonal influence for students, which then guides their reasoned evaluation of candidates and thus, in turn, their final voting decision.

#### **1.4 Towards an Integrative theoretical Framework**

Antunes (2010) recognised that all three models should not be viewed as competing explanations of voting behaviour but as a continuous and complementary theoretical explanation that brings light to various dimensions of the electoral decision-making process. The sociological model emphasises how the social structures, group affiliations and interpersonal relationships shape the broader environment in which electoral decisions are made; the psychological model builds upon this foundation and explains how these social influences are internalised as enduring psychological orientations that shape their perceptions of political issues, campaign experiences and their competing candidates. Finally, the rational choice model explains how the socially and psychologically mediated models guide the reasoned evaluations of electoral candidates before casting a vote. Thus, voting behaviour is seen not as a product of isolated influences but rather of that of the continuous interactions between the social relationships, psychological orientations and rational evaluations.

For the purpose of this study, this framework is vital for examining student voting behaviour in higher educational institutes in Kohima, Nagaland. Rather than taking an experimental approach, this study adopts Antunes' integrative framework by organising multiple variables into three complimentary dimensions that capture the sequence through which electoral decisions are made

The first dimension of social networks and obligations primarily draws on the sociological model and encompasses variables such as those of peer influence, family influence, tribal influence, socio-cultural groups, campaigning and hostel influence. These variables become the socially embedded context in which students encounter electoral information, develop political discussions and experience collective expectations.

The second dimension of Democratic Values leans into the psychosocial model and encompasses variables such as those of political beliefs, political knowledge, civic duty, political trust and political efficacy. Rather than representing partisan attachment, these variables represent the internal democratic orientations through which students interpret their electoral environment and make sense of social interactions surrounding the election process.

Lastly, the third dimension of candidate factors leans into the rational choice theory, and candidates are evaluated by students based on leadership ability, candidate policies, campaign promises and expected reforms. These variables represent the reasoned assessment of competing characteristics through which students translate their socially and psychologically informed perceptions into final voting decisions.

While these dimensions are distinguished analytically, they are not studied to be operating independently. Staying consistent with Antunes's integrative framework, the study assumes that

social relationships provide the context of electoral participation, psychological orientations shape student interpretation of campaign interactions and candidate evaluations represent the culmination of that process through rational assessment of candidates. Thus, student voting behaviour is conceived as the dependent variable that emerges out of the continuous interaction of the sociological, psychosocial and rational choice influences throughout the electoral process

## **2. Research Design**

The study adopted a mixed-method research design in which qualitative and quantitative data were integrated to form a comprehensive understanding of student voting behaviour. The qualitative data examined the extent to which sociological, psychosocial and rational choice factors influenced student decisions in the voting process, whereas the qualitative data sought to analyse the lived experiences of the students as well as their explanations for their voting behaviour. This enabled the study to put forward a richer analysis over student voting behaviour.

### **2.1 Study Area**

The study was conducted in the district of Kohima, Nagaland, over the course of the 2024-25 academic year. Being the capital of the state, Kohima serves as a multicultural zone with a diverse higher education sector comprising both private and government colleges. This enabled students hailing from multiple socio-cultural backgrounds and geographical settings to be based within colleges from the district. Thus, the capital served as an appropriate area of focus for examining student voting behaviour, as colleges regularly conduct elections for student representatives; therefore, it offers students ample opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making within the realm of higher education.

### **2.2 Population, Sampling and Participants**

The target population comprised of undergraduate students enrolled in colleges in Kohima District, Nagaland. All higher education institutions were identified initially; however, only the colleges that satisfied the criteria for the study were considered eligible for engagement. This being said, the study required colleges to conduct student representative body elections and to specifically cater to undergraduate students.

Colleges that did not meet the criteria were excluded, as they did not provide the necessary electoral context to examine student voting behaviour. Furthermore, universities were also excluded, as their student unions typically represented a broader spectrum of the higher education population rather than just the undergraduate population. This restriction enabled better comparability across studied institutions and maintained consistency for the purpose of the study.

Some religion-based institutions were also taken into consideration; however, they couldn't be included, as differences in academic schedules as well as institutional permission couldn't be gathered within the time period of the study. As the time period for the completion of the study was during the academic year of 2024-25, data collection was confined to institutions that were accessible during that timeframe.

Therefore, the final sample comprised of 11 colleges where a total of 692 undergraduates participated in the survey study. Stratified random sampling was used within institutions to ensure adequate and fair representation of students across colleges and semesters within. Qualitative data was also obtained through semi-structured interview responses, which enabled students to respond elaborately on the factors influencing their voting behaviour and their experiences as student representatives as well as voters alike in relation to their elections.

### **2.3 Data Collection instrument**

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire which was developed as part of a minor project examining undergraduate students' voting behaviour in Kohima district. Thus, the questionnaire was designed to put forward varying elements of electoral participation and student engagement. This being said, for the purpose of the study, only relevant data was analysed in relation to the study objectives.

### **2.4 Data Collection Procedure**

Permission was obtained from the participating colleges to conduct the study before the data was collected. Questionnaires were handed to respondents in person, and the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of participation were explained before data collection. Interviews were conducted with consent at mutually convenient times.

### **2.5 Data Analysis**

The quantitative data collected from the survey underwent analysis employing simple percentage, mean and standard deviation calculations along with Likert scale methodology. For qualitative data, thematic analysis with intelligent verbatim transcription (IVT) was used. This was considered appropriate so as to accommodate the usage of local dialects used in several interviews.

### **2.6 Ethical Considerations**

Permissions were obtained before data collection from all 11 colleges. Before administering the survey and conducting the interviews, the respondents received detailed information regarding the nature of the study and its objectives. The voluntary nature of participation was also

highlighted. Interview consent was also obtained for the data acquired via audio recording. Every response was anonymously registered, and no personal information was gathered. Interview transcripts were maintained using participant codes so as to protect the anonymity of the respondents. All findings are thus presented in aggregates, and interview quotations are reported anonymously so as to protect the identity of the participants.

### **3. Findings**

#### **3.1 Respondent profile**

A total of 692 undergraduate students from 11 colleges within the district of Kohima participated in the study. As seen in table 1, respondents were represented diversely in terms of demographic backgrounds with respect to gender, age, year of study, institutional voting participation rate and their role in the election process, thereby providing a near-balanced inclusion of perspectives for the study in student elections.

**Table 1. Demographic profile of Respondents (n = 692)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>325</b>	<b>47.0</b>
	<b>Female</b>	<b>367</b>	<b>53.0</b>
<b>Age (in years)</b>	<b>Below 18</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>2.0</b>
	<b>19-21</b>	<b>547</b>	<b>79.0</b>
	<b>22 and above</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>19.0</b>
<b>Year of study</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup> year</b>	<b>208</b>	<b>30.0</b>
	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> year</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>35.0</b>
	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> year</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>35.0</b>
<b>Election participation in student elections</b>	<b>Once</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>35.0</b>
	<b>Twice</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>25.0</b>
	<b>Thrice</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>40.0</b>
<b>Role in election</b>	<b>Candidate</b>	<b>284</b>	<b>41.0</b>
	<b>Voter only</b>	<b>408</b>	<b>59.0</b>

*Source: Authors' own work*

*Note: Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.*

### 3.2 Social Relationships as the Context for Electoral Decision-making

The first aspect of the study examined the social environment in which undergraduate students experienced student representative elections. Table 2 notes responses on the perceived influence that external factors have in shaping students’ electoral decisions.

Campaigns and advertisements received the highest mean score of 3.22, followed by candidate policies (M=3.19), News media (M=3.13), Socio-cultural groups (M=3.08), family influence (M=3.06), Social media (M=3.02), and political beliefs (2.96). Friends’ influence was received as the lowest factor with a mean score of 2.72.

**Table 2. Influence of external factors.**

Factor	Mean	Rank
Campaigns and advertisements	3.22	1
Candidate policies	3.19	2
News media	3.13	3
Socio-cultural groups	3.08	4
Family influence	3.06	5
Social media	3.02	6
Political beliefs	2.96	7
Friends’ influence	2.72	8

*Source: Authors’ own work*

**Note: Mean scores are based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not influenced at all to 5 = Very strongly influenced.**

While immediate scrutiny suggests that campaign activities have the strongest influence on students' electoral decisions, qualitative findings reveal that campaigning for student body elections possessed a different meaning from that of conventional political campaigning.

Campaigns became socially embedded processes through which students encountered not just candidates but also negotiated relationships and encountered collective expectations.

One respondent explained, "Candidates usually come to us because they know they need our majority vote...if someone from the main hostel is contesting, we're usually told to vote for them. It's presented as our 'duty' to support our hostel mates." Another student observed, "Friends and hostel mates sometimes introduce us to candidates we don't know personally and persuade us to support them." These accounts suggest that electoral campaigns became opportunities for students to encounter political information through interpersonal relationships rather than detached political campaigns.

Hostel communities became influential voting blocs through which expectations in relations to solidarity and reciprocity emerged in sync with electoral participation. This is seen to be evident when one respondent, noting their perception of voting changed over time, stated, "...in the second year, I realised it could also be beneficial to support someone from our hostel because they would reciprocate our support when we contest later." The interviews further revealed how campaign interactions intersected with tribal identity. One respondent noted that they had experienced tribalism in one case where it had led to internal tensions between communities.

This being noted, the same respondents also emphasised individual agency, where they weighed all opinions against their own judgement to assess candidate capability. These findings indicate that social relationships, rather than influencing electoral behaviour in isolation, provided a broader electoral environment within which students encountered candidates, exchanged political information and experienced collective expectations. Thereafter, these experiences became the basis through which students interpreted their electoral process.

### **3.3 Democratic Values as the Psychological Interpretation of the electoral Environment**

Through experiencing elections from their social environment, students consequently interpreted these experiences through their own democratic values and political orientations. The findings, as noted in Table 3, suggest that candidate characteristics (36%), personal beliefs and values (26%) and civic duty (24%) were decided on most frequently as sources of motivation. In comparison, the influence of socio-cultural groups (6%), policy issues (5%), media influence (2%) or other reasons (2%) had considerably lower recognition.

**Table 3. Students’ primary motivation for electoral participation**

Motivation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Candidate characteristics	355	36
Personal beliefs and values	251	26
Civic duty	240	24
Influence of socio-cultural groups	57	6
Policy issues	49	5
Influence of media	18	2
Other	9	1

*Source: Authors’ own work*

***Note: Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.***

Thus, survey results suggest that student participation is primarily motivated by commitment to candidate qualities, personal beliefs and values and civic duty. However, qualitative data suggests that these democratic orientations were not formed independently of their social experiences. Instead, it was seen that democratic values became the psychological framework through which students interpreted their campaign interactions, peer discussions and electoral expectations.

Several respondents described voting as an obligation arising from their understanding of democratic values. As one participant stated, "I believe voting is important. Even if the outcome seems predictable, the least we can do is show up and vote." Similarly, another respondent explained, "It is my duty to fulfil, so I put my feelings aside when it comes to taking a decision." These statements suggest that students saw participation as their civic responsibility rather than just an institutional requirement.

Students also acknowledged that their democratic commitments were formed through interactions with others. Elections became a collective experience where candidates not only gained approval through hostel voting blocs but also built alliances through peer discussions. One respondent acknowledged, "Since I stay in the main hostel, candidates usually come to us because they know they need our majority vote... If someone from the main hostel is contesting, we’re usually told to vote for them."

Coming from the perspective of a candidate, it was acknowledged that hostels were voting blocs that influenced voting behaviour – which was coincidentally influenced by a sense of unity. Coming to the matter of peer discussions, one participant observed, "I do take their advice as well as their influence because their opinion also matters. They might know better than me." This suggested that students actively interpreted their social experiences through their own democratic beliefs.

Evidence thus suggests that social relationships provided the context of electoral participation, while democratic values such as that of civic responsibility, political beliefs and perceptions of leadership shaped the meaning that students attached to those experiences before they evaluated their candidates.

### **3.4 Candidate Evaluation as the Culmination for Electoral Decision-making**

The final aspect of the electoral process involved students translating their socially situated experiences and democratic orientations into evaluation of candidates. As seen in Table 4, honesty and integrity (46%) were overwhelmingly prioritised as the most preferred characteristics, followed by having leadership and organisational skills at 43%. Incidentally, qualities like charismatic personality (7%) and belonging to the same socio-cultural group (3%) or other characteristics (1%) had fewer respondents prioritising them.

**Table 4. Preferred candidate characteristics.**

<b>Preferred Candidate Characteristic</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Honesty and integrity</b>	<b>413</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Leadership and organisational skills</b>	<b>387</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Charismatic personality</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Same socio-cultural group</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>

*Source: Authors' own work*

*Note: Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number*

Quantitative analysis suggests that students attached great importance to ethical leadership and competence rather than shared social identity or popularity. Qualitative data, however, points provides greater insight behind these preferences and show how these evaluations were formed.

The interviews definitively reinforced the quantitative findings of honesty and integrity being the most valued qualities, whereby one respondent simply explained, "I just look for honesty and integrity." Another respondent stated, "I look for someone who will work for the college, who understands the issues, and will deliver on their promise."

Leadership competence also came up to be evaluated before final decisions were taken. Respondents evaluated contending candidates on their ability to solve problems, fulfil campaign promises and represent the interests of students rather than their personal popularity. Upon closer inspection, it was evident that campaign interaction became important opportunities through which these qualities were assessed. A respondent remarked that 'I vote based on their agenda and how they present themselves—not just on their label of being 'capable'. They must also prove themselves through their action.' Similarly, another responded, "From my past voting experiences, I have taken my decisions after the speech.' This, campaign speeches, direct interactions and previous experiences became sources of information that students could interpret accordingly to their own democratic expectations.

It is also important to know that respondents frequently distinguish electoral judgement from their personal relationships. One respondent explained, "Even if the person is closer to me...if they are not capable...I support the other candidate who is more logical and more honest." This reveals that although friendship, hostel affiliations and peer networks shaped their exposure to the candidates through the campaign period, respondents attempted to prioritise competence in making their final choice. This thus illustrates that while the influences of interpersonal relationships became one source of information, they were weighed alongside assessments of competence and leadership.

Thus, candidate evaluation represented the culmination of the broader electoral process where students encountered their candidates through socially embedded interactions, interpreted those experiences through their own democratic values and expectations of representations and ultimately evaluated competing candidates according to their competence, honesty, leadership and institutional commitment before casting their vote.

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **4.1 Student elections as a process for democratic citizenship**

A significant finding of this research shows that student representative elections went beyond the administrative task of selecting office bearers. It functioned as a space for negotiating democratic citizenship where students balanced civic responsibility, engaged with various viewpoints in a social context, and simultaneously held expectations of leadership.

These findings reinforce the role of educational institutions in fostering democratic citizenship where students can gain access to opportunities that enable them to turn abstract learning of democratic ideals into everyday practice through participation in governance structures such as that of student elections.

These findings also reinforce the scholarship that reinforces higher educational institutions as important sites of democratic learning (Watfa & Ait Ali, 2025). Moving a step further, this study demonstrates that while student participation strengthens student engagement in both civic and political life, it is done so through the continuous negotiation of democratic ideals, social realities and rational evaluation. Thus, democratic citizenship is seen not just as an acquisition of civic knowledge but as a lived process.

### **4.2 Social Relationships as the Electoral Context**

The findings also extend the sociological perspective of the Colombia School, as explained by Antunes (2010), which argued that electoral behaviour develops through social interaction and group membership. The present study similarly saw that peer groups, hostel communities, tribal affiliations and campaign interactions shaped the environment in which students encountered candidates and electoral information.

This being said, the findings also extend this perspective when it was described by the candidates that social relationships don't necessarily determine their votes. Instead, campaigns functioned as sites of discussion, encounters with candidates and informational exchanges, whereas hostel and friendship networks enabled candidate exposure. Thus, social relationships provided the context within which electoral decision-making occurred rather than directly being the determining factor of electoral outcomes. This thus supports Antunes' (2010) argument that sociological explanations cannot fully account for voting behaviour alone and require evaluation alongside the psychosocial and the rational dimensions.

### **4.3 Democratic Values as the Mediating Force**

The psychosocial dimension of electoral behaviour adds to the significant contribution of this study, where civic duty, honesty, accountability and student expectations of leadership emerged as consistent standards through which campaign interactions and candidate behaviour were evaluated. This can be seen as evident in respondents' acknowledgement of the influence of peer discussions, hostel expectations and tribal networks in interpreting these experiences through their own democratic values before electoral decisions were made.

These findings thus mirror Antunes' (2010) interpretation of the Michigan school, where, rather than being an isolated measurement of voting behaviour, psychological orientations mediated between students' social environments and their electoral decisions. While the student elections were absent of party identification, democratic values served as a similar mediating force by shaping how students interpreted campaign messages, peer recommendations and social relationships. This study thus highlights the nexus that psychological orientations provide in the electoral decision-making process even in a non-partisan campus setting.

### **4.4. Candidate Evaluation as the Culmination of an Integrated Electoral process.**

According to Antunes (2010), the rational choice theory conceptualises voting as a process through which individuals make decisions in a rational manner, thereby making electoral decisions through a process of calculation where selection of the option that produces greatest benefit is exercised. Within the scope of the study, this finding is supported as candidates were assessed based on calculations of their ethical leadership and competence to hold office.

However, the study also presents findings that indicate that candidate assessment cannot simply be seen as a rational calculation. Leadership evaluations of candidates were constantly evaluated through interactions with candidates via campaigns and reflections over previous electoral experiences. This implies that candidate competence was not evaluated in isolation but through an engagement with the electoral process itself.

Honesty, integrity and trustworthiness were consistently identified as essential qualities of an effective student representative, suggesting that electoral decisions were informed not only by expectations of performance but also by normative judgements about character. One respondent explained that they looked for "someone who will work for the college, understand the issues and fulfil their promises", while another emphasised that honesty and integrity were the primary qualities considered before voting. These findings indicate that students evaluated candidates according to moral standards as well as practical competence.

Importantly, these ethical judgements were themselves shaped by social interaction. Students frequently encountered candidates through hostel visits, classroom campaigns and recommendations from peers, allowing them to develop impressions of candidates' credibility, sincerity and leadership potential. Personal familiarity and repeated interaction therefore influenced how students interpreted campaign messages and assessed candidate character. Yet respondents consistently maintained that these relationships did not replace independent judgement. Instead, they reflected on whether social loyalties, personal familiarity or recommendations from friends should outweigh competence and integrity when casting their votes.

Accordingly, candidate assessment within student representative elections cannot be understood solely through the logic of rational choice theory. Rather than representing an isolated process of cost-benefit calculation, electoral judgement emerged through the interaction of reasoned evaluation, interpersonal engagement and ethical reflection. Students assessed competence and anticipated performance, but these assessments were continually informed by their democratic values, previous experiences and social interactions throughout the campaign period. This finding lends further support to Antunes' (2010) proposition that voting behaviour is best understood through an integrative framework in which rational, psychosocial and sociological influences operate simultaneously rather than independently.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study examined the voting behaviour of undergraduate students in students' elections across institutes of higher education in Kohima District, Nagaland. Through the integrative framework proposed by Antunes (2010), the study explored how the sociological, psychosocial and rational choice influences interacted throughout the electoral decision-making process. Evidence to supplement this perspective was drawn through survey data comprising 692 undergraduate respondents and qualitative interview evidence to complement it.

The findings suggest that student behaviour can not be solely understood through any one theoretical tradition. Rather, each tradition represented elements of social relationships, democratic values and candidate evaluation which operated in negotiation with one another throughout the student electoral process. Students experienced elections through socially embedded environments which were characterised by peer networks, hostel communities, tribal affiliations and campaign interactions. These experiences were then interpreted through internal democratic orientations of civic duty, trust, political beliefs and expectations of ethical leadership before they substantiated the evaluation of candidates based on competence, honesty, leadership ability and institutional commitment. Thus, student voting behaviour arises from the continuous negotiation of sociological, psychosocial and rational processes rather than through isolated acts.

As a result, this study provides empirical support for Antunes' (2010) proposition of understanding all three traditions to be understood as complementary rather than in opposition to one another. While Antunes developed this framework through the macro literature on electoral behaviour, the present study demonstrates how this is applicable in the microcosm of student representative elections. By extension, this extends the framework to the realm of higher education by showing that democratic participation among young adults unfolds through a continuous process whereby social experiences are interpreted through democratic values after which a reasoned candidate evaluation is made and votes are cast.

The study also highlights the importance of viewing students' elections not just from a theoretical perspective but as a space for practising and negotiating democratic citizenship. Rather than looking at it as an institutional exercise, campus elections become an arena where young adults can engage with competing viewpoints, negotiate social expectations and evaluate leadership. This contributes to the process of political socialisation beyond the domain of higher education.

A few caveats should be kept in mind while understanding these findings. The study's concentration on undergraduate students from higher educational institutions in Kohima district reflects a specific electoral context. Furthermore, this study is limited by its comparative analytical function that has been assigned to democratic values as against the broad psychosocial processes conceptualised by the Michigan school. Although this necessarily enabled the comparative analysis of students' internal orientations, it cannot fully replicate the broader psychosocial processes associated with long-term political identification. The findings should therefore be seen as interpreting the mediating role of democratic values within student elections rather than the complete psychosocial model.

Further studies can provide deeper understanding of how such democratic orientations develop over time. Studies could also extend the research beyond the district of Kohima to examine student electoral behaviour across regions within Nagaland, neighbouring states, the nation or even in comparative international settings to help determine broader patterns beyond this study.

Ultimately, this study argues that student elections should not be seen merely as exercises to prepare students for democratic participation but as democratic participation itself. By showing how students continuously negotiate between social obligations, democratic values and candidate evaluations throughout the electoral process, the study highlights that higher educational institutions are important arenas where democratic citizenship is actively experienced, constructed and maintained.

## References

- Amer, M. (2009). *Political Awareness and its Implications on Participatory Behaviour*. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/sae/indgen/v16y2009i3p359-374.html>
- Antunes, R. (2010). *Theoretical models of voting behaviour*.
- Banerjee, M. (2019). Money and Meaning in Elections: Towards a theory of the vote. *Modern Asian Studies*, 54, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000798>
- Bekker, M., Runciman, C., & Roberts, B. (2022). Beyond the binary: Examining dynamic youth voter behaviour in South Africa. *Politikon*, 49(4), 297–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2022.2151687>
- Bhattacharya, U. (2024). *Exploring Student Political Engagement: Perceptions and Participation at Delhi University's North Campus* (SSRN Scholarly Paper No. 4840452). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4840452>
- Hazarika, B. (2015). *Voting Behaviour in India and Its Determinants*. 20(10).
- Mandakh, A.-Od., Gantulga, U., & Sampil, B. (2024). A STUDY OF FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUNG VOTERS' CHOICE BEHAVIOR. *Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Humanitas Zarządzanie*, 25(3), 9–27. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0054.7764>
- Panagopoulos, C., & Wang, C.-H. (2025). *Frontiers | Rationality, affect, and vote choice*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1640408>
- Suhay, E. (2015). Explaining Group Influence: The Role of Identity and Emotion in Political Conformity and Polarization. *Political Behavior*, 37(1), 221–251.
- Watfa, A. A., & Ait Ali, D. (2025). *Frontiers | From national loyalty to student political participation: The mediating effect of university citizenship promotion*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1600175>
- Wouters, J.J.P. (2014). *Performing Democracy in Nagaland | Economic and Political Weekly [Journal]*. Economic and Political Weekly. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2014/16/special-articles/performing-democracy-nagaland.html>