

Democratic Idealism to Practical Reality: Examining Senior High School Students' Perceived Challenges Toward Political Participation in the Cape Coast Metropolis of Ghana

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Abstract: *This study examined the transition from democratic idealism to practical reality by exploring senior high school students' perceived challenges toward political participation in the Cape Coast Metropolis of Ghana. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey design and employed stratified sampling techniques to select 400 respondents from selected senior high schools within the metropolis. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and*

analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, as well as inferential statistics through one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The findings revealed that students encountered several challenges that constrained their active involvement in political participation. Key challenges identified included fear of rejection and victimization, insults, discrimination, political exclusion, exploitation, intimidation, and political violence, all of which negatively influenced students' willingness to engage in democratic activities. Despite these challenges, the study found no statistically significant differences in students' understanding of political participation based on age and grade level (form), indicating relatively similar levels of political awareness across demographic categories. The study concludes that sociopolitical barriers continue to undermine youth political engagement despite increasing democratic awareness among students. The study therefore recommends the inclusion of students in school and community decision-making processes to strengthen democratic consciousness, civic competence, and meaningful political participation among young people in Ghana.

Keywords, political participation, democratic engagement, civic education, youth participation, democratic governance, senior high school students, civic consciousness

INTRODUCTION

Political participation remains a central pillar of democratic governance and civic engagement across contemporary societies. In democratic states, active citizen participation in political processes contributes significantly to accountability, representation, legitimacy, and national development. Scholars such as Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) argue that democratic governance becomes ineffective when citizens fail to actively engage in political processes and public decision-making. Consequently, political participation has increasingly attracted scholarly attention, particularly regarding the role of young people in sustaining democratic culture and civic consciousness.

One of the most recognized determinants of political participation is educational attainment. Existing literature demonstrates a strong relationship between education and civic engagement, suggesting that education equips individuals with the civic competencies, political awareness, and communication skills necessary for effective democratic participation (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011). Verba et al. (1995) further emphasized that education enhances individuals' civic skills and political efficacy, enabling them to communicate concerns effectively to political leaders and institutions. Similarly, Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) argued that formal education provides citizens with the intellectual capacity to understand political processes, evaluate political candidates, and engage meaningfully in public affairs.

Empirical evidence from developing democracies further suggests that secondary and tertiary education positively influence civic and political participation among young people (Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Green, 2010; Larreguy & Marshall, 2014; MacLean, 2011). In

the Ghanaian context, civic and democratic education have been integrated into the Social Studies curriculum by the Ghana Education Service (GES) and the Ministry of Education to cultivate democratic values, civic responsibility, and participatory citizenship among students (MOE, 2007). The curriculum seeks to expose students to democratic principles, political institutions, voting processes, civic duties, and active citizenship.

Despite these educational interventions, concerns persist regarding the extent to which students meaningfully understand and engage in political participation. Evidence suggests that many young people continue to demonstrate limited political interest, low participation, and inadequate understanding of democratic engagement processes (UNDP, 2012). Verba et al. (1995) attributed this challenge to limited civic resources, low psychological engagement, and inadequate mobilization opportunities among young people. Similarly, Carpini and Keeter (1996) argued that many students possess insufficient knowledge of public affairs and governance processes despite increasing educational attainment. Niemi and Junn (1998) further observed that inadequate civic instruction contributes significantly to political apathy and low democratic awareness among students.

Within the Cape Coast Metropolis, anecdotal observations during school prefect elections revealed that many senior high school students exhibited limited practical understanding of democratic practices such as voting, campaigning, civic advocacy, and political decision-making despite studying democratic principles in school. These concerns raise critical questions regarding whether democratic education in Ghanaian senior high schools adequately translates democratic idealism into practical political engagement among students.

Research Gaps and Justification for the Study

Political participation remains a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, active citizenship, and civic inclusion within contemporary societies. Consequently, democratic states invest substantially in civic and political education to equip young people with the knowledge, attitudes, values, and competencies required for meaningful participation in democratic processes. In Ghana, the Social Studies curriculum introduced by the Ministry of Education and the Ghana Education Service was specifically designed to promote democratic consciousness, civic responsibility, and participatory citizenship among students (MOE, 2007). Despite these educational efforts, concerns continue to emerge regarding students' practical understanding of political participation and the challenges limiting their effective democratic engagement.

Empirical literature consistently suggests that education positively influences political awareness, civic competence, and participation (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011; Verba et al., 1995). However, studies across both developed and developing democracies indicate that young people, particularly secondary school students, often demonstrate low political participation, weak civic engagement, and inadequate understanding of democratic processes (UNDP, 2012). Verba et al. (1995) further argued that youth participation is frequently constrained by limited civic skills, weak mobilization structures, low political efficacy, and inadequate participatory opportunities, while Niemi and Junn

(1998) attributed youth political disengagement to insufficient civic instruction and declining interest in governance and public affairs.

Recent scholarly works have increasingly examined youth political participation, democratic inclusion, digital activism, and gender representation across Africa and other emerging democracies. Kumove and Dyrstad (2025), for instance, investigated the influence of demographic youth bulges on political participation across Africa and found that age significantly shapes voting and protest participation patterns. Although the study highlighted the growing political influence of African youth populations, it concentrated primarily on macro-level demographic trends without specifically examining the perceptions and participation challenges confronting senior high school students within educational settings.

Similarly, Baizhumakzy, Tangkish, Mazhinbekov, Sarsenbekov, and Korganova (2025) identified civic responsibility, democratic values, and political culture as important determinants of youth political participation in Kazakhstan. However, the study focused largely on general youth populations outside the African educational and sociocultural context. Within Ghana, Ablateye (2024) explored women and youth political representation following the implementation of the Affirmative Action Gender Equity Act (2024), highlighting persistent barriers to inclusive democratic participation despite policy interventions. Nyianle (2025) also demonstrated that social media significantly influences political awareness and civic engagement among Ghanaian youth in Sekondi-Takoradi, while Brantuo (2026) identified education, social capital, financial resources, and political networks as key determinants of women's political participation within local governance systems.

In a related study, Vellinga (2025) examined the relationship between youth employment and political participation in Ghana and found that employment conditions influence the level and strategies of youth democratic engagement. Likewise, Frimpomaa-Afrane (2025) emphasized the relevance of grassroots participation and participatory governance in enhancing youth inclusion and institutional responsiveness within Ghanaian governance structures.

Despite the growing body of literature, important empirical and contextual gaps remain unresolved. Existing studies have predominantly focused on general youth populations, women's political representation, employment conditions, digital activism, governance structures, and policy reforms, with limited scholarly attention devoted to senior high school students as a distinct demographic group within political participation research. More critically, previous studies have not adequately examined the perceived challenges confronting senior high school students regarding political participation, particularly within the Cape Coast Metropolis of Ghana.

Furthermore, many existing studies adopted broader national or regional perspectives without specifically exploring how institutional, psychological, socioeconomic, and democratic barriers shape political participation within secondary educational environments. Issues such as political intimidation, fear of rejection, exclusion, insults, exploitation, violence, and inadequate civic

exposure among students remain insufficiently examined within the Ghanaian context. Preliminary observations during school electoral activities within the Cape Coast Metropolis further suggested that many students struggled to demonstrate practical democratic engagement despite exposure to civic education, thereby raising concerns regarding the effectiveness of democratic socialization within schools.

This study therefore addresses these significant gaps by specifically examining senior high school students' perceived challenges toward political participation within the Cape Coast Metropolis of Ghana. The study contributes to existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the institutional, psychological, and socioeconomic barriers affecting youth democratic engagement at the pre-tertiary educational level. The study further extends contemporary debates on political participation, civic education, democratic socialization, and youth inclusion within emerging African democracies. Beyond its scholarly contribution, the findings provide context-specific insights capable of informing educational policy reforms, civic education programmes, democratic governance strategies, and youth participation initiatives in Ghana and similar democratic contexts.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this research is to explore democratic idealism to practical reality by exploring senior high school students' perceived challenges toward political participation in the Cape Coast Metropolis of Ghana. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. investigate the opinions of SHS students in the Cape Coast Metropolis on the challenges they face in political participation
2. Investigate SHS students in the Cape Coast Metropolis understanding of political participation in terms of age
3. Explore SHS students in the Cape Coast Metropolis understanding political participation in terms of the 'grade' of students

Research Question

The research question has been formulated to guide the direction of this study:

1. What are the opinions of SHS students in the Cape Coast Metropolis on the challenges they face in political participation?

Hypotheses

The following corresponding hypotheses have been formulated to help evaluate how 'age' and 'grade', can determine the knowledge and understanding of political participation:

1. H₀: There is no statistically significant difference in SHS students' understanding of political participation based on age.
2. H₀: There is no statistically significant difference in the understanding of political participation with respect to the grade level of SHS students.

Significance of this Research

This study contributes significantly to contemporary scholarship on youth political participation, democratic engagement, and civic education within developing democracies, particularly in the Ghanaian context. The study extends existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the perceived challenges that constrain political participation among senior high school students, a relatively underexplored population in political participation research.

The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, curriculum developers, educational institutions, and democratic governance stakeholders seeking to strengthen civic consciousness and participatory citizenship among young people. Specifically, the study provides evidence-based understanding of the sociopolitical, psychological, and institutional barriers affecting youth political engagement, thereby informing the design of inclusive civic education policies and democratic interventions.

Furthermore, the study contributes to educational policy and curriculum reforms by highlighting the need to bridge the gap between democratic idealism and practical democratic engagement within Ghana's educational system. The findings may assist the Ministry of Education, Ghana Education Service, and National Council for Curriculum and Assessment in strengthening democratic education programmes aimed at promoting active citizenship, political efficacy, and youth inclusion in democratic governance processes.

Author's Novelty

This study introduces a novel scholarly perspective by shifting the discourse on political participation from generalized youth populations to senior high school students within a pre-tertiary educational context in Ghana. While previous studies have largely concentrated on macro-level political participation trends, youth activism, digital engagement, employment conditions, gender inclusion, and governance reforms, the present study specifically examines the perceived challenges confronting senior high school students toward political participation within the Cape Coast Metropolis.

The originality of the study further lies in its integration of democratic education, civic socialization, and practical political engagement within the secondary school environment. Unlike existing studies that primarily examine participation outcomes among adults, university students, or broader youth populations, this study uniquely investigates how institutional, psychological, and socioeconomic barriers such as fear, intimidation, exclusion, violence, exploitation, and inadequate civic exposure influence democratic participation among pre-tertiary students. The study therefore contributes a context-specific and empirically grounded understanding of youth democratic engagement within emerging African democracies.

Contribution to Academic Debate

The study contributes substantially to ongoing academic debates surrounding the relationship between civic education and political participation among young people. Existing scholarship,

particularly Verba et al. (1995), Berinsky and Lenz (2011), and Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), has traditionally argued that education enhances civic competence, political efficacy, and democratic engagement. However, the findings of this study complicate these assumptions by demonstrating that exposure to civic education alone may not automatically translate into practical political participation among students.

Furthermore, the study extends contemporary debates on youth political disengagement by highlighting the role of contextual barriers within educational environments. The findings support arguments advanced by Niemi and Junn (1998) and UNDP (2012) that inadequate civic experiences, weak mobilization structures, and psychological barriers continue to undermine democratic participation among young people despite educational interventions. By foregrounding the experiences of senior high school students within the Ghanaian context, the study enriches scholarly discussions on democratic socialization, participatory citizenship, and youth inclusion within emerging democracies.

Contribution to Knowledge

The study makes important empirical, theoretical, and contextual contributions to knowledge on political participation and democratic engagement. Empirically, the study provides evidence on the specific challenges affecting political participation among senior high school students in the Cape Coast Metropolis, an area that has received limited scholarly attention within Ghanaian political participation research. The study therefore fills an important gap in the literature by documenting how institutional, psychological, and social barriers shape students' democratic participation and political understanding.

Theoretically, the study extends existing political participation frameworks by demonstrating that youth democratic engagement is not solely determined by education, age, or civic knowledge, but is also shaped by contextual experiences, participatory opportunities, and sociopolitical environments. The findings further contribute to democratic socialization theory by emphasizing the importance of experiential civic learning and institutional support within schools.

Practically, the study generates context-specific evidence capable of informing educational policy reforms, civic education programmes, democratic governance initiatives, and youth participation strategies within Ghana and similar developing democracies. The findings also provide valuable insights for policymakers, curriculum developers, electoral institutions, and civic organizations seeking to strengthen democratic culture, active citizenship, and youth political inclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review examined the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical foundations underpinning political participation and democratic engagement among students. Conceptually, the review explored the nature of political participation, including conventional and unconventional participation, political disengagement, direct and indirect participation, principles

and determinants of participation, and varying levels of civic involvement. The theoretical review focused on prominent explanatory models of political participation, including the Civic Voluntarism Model, Rational Choice Model, Social Psychological Model, Mobilization Model, and General Incentives Model developed by Seyd and Whiteley. Empirically, the review examined students' understanding of political participation, prevailing challenges, and the influence of gender and education on youth political engagement and democratic participation.

Theoretical Models of Political Participation

Political participation has been extensively examined through diverse theoretical perspectives aimed at explaining why individuals engage in or withdraw from democratic processes. This study draws primarily on the integrated models of political participation developed by Whiteley and Seyd (2002), which synthesize structural, psychological, rational, and mobilization perspectives to explain civic engagement and political behaviour. These models provide a robust analytical foundation for understanding students' political participation, perceived barriers, and democratic engagement within the Ghanaian educational context.

The **Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM)**, developed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), remains one of the most influential frameworks in political participation literature. The model posits that participation is shaped by three interrelated factors: civic resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks. According to Verba et al. (1995), individuals fail to participate because "they can't, they don't want to, or nobody asked them" (p. 269). Civic resources such as education, income, time, civic skills, and political knowledge significantly influence individuals' capacity for participation, while psychological engagement and mobilization networks further determine political involvement.

The **Rational Choice Model (RCM)**, rooted in Downs' (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, conceptualizes political participation as a rational decision-making process based on cost-benefit calculations. The model assumes that individuals participate in politics when perceived rewards exceed associated costs and risks. Whiteley and Seyd (2002) further emphasized that selective incentives, personal gains, and collective benefits influence participation decisions. Although critics have highlighted the "paradox of participation," the model remains relevant in explaining politically motivated behaviours among youth and democratic actors.

The **Social Psychological Model (SPM)** explains political participation through attitudes, beliefs, norms, trust, and political efficacy. Drawing on Fishbein's behavioural theory, the model argues that individuals' participation behaviours are influenced by attitudes toward political action, normative expectations, and motivation to comply with social norms (Fishbein, 1967; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1969). Whiteley and Seyd (2002) further argued that participation is reinforced when individuals perceive political engagement as socially desirable, morally justified, and capable of producing meaningful outcomes. Social trust, peer influence, and civic socialization therefore become critical determinants of political behaviour.

The **Mobilization Model (MM)** emphasizes the importance of political opportunities, institutional support, and external mobilization in shaping political participation. Whiteley and Seyd (2002) argued that individuals participate when exposed to political campaigns, organizational networks, social pressures, and recruitment structures. The model further suggests that participation opportunities are unevenly distributed across populations due to disparities in socioeconomic resources, institutional access, and political exposure.

Finally, the **General Incentives Model (GIM)** integrates rational choice and social psychological assumptions by emphasizing selective, ideological, process, and collective incentives as major drivers of political participation. According to Whiteley and Seyd (2002), individuals engage in politics not only for private rewards but also to pursue collective societal interests, ideological commitments, and democratic goals. The model therefore broadens the understanding of participation beyond individual benefits to include collective democratic outcomes and social transformation.

Collectively, these models provide a multidimensional explanation of political participation by emphasizing the interaction between civic resources, democratic socialization, psychological orientations, institutional opportunities, and sociopolitical incentives. The integrated application of these models offers a comprehensive framework for understanding senior high school students' perceived challenges toward political participation within the Cape Coast Metropolis of Ghana.

Author's Conceptual Framework

Drawing from the interrelated assumptions of the Civic Voluntarism Model, Rational Choice Model, Social Psychological Model, Mobilization Model, and General Incentives Model, this study develops an integrated conceptual framework explaining students' political participation and perceived challenges within the Cape Coast Metropolis.

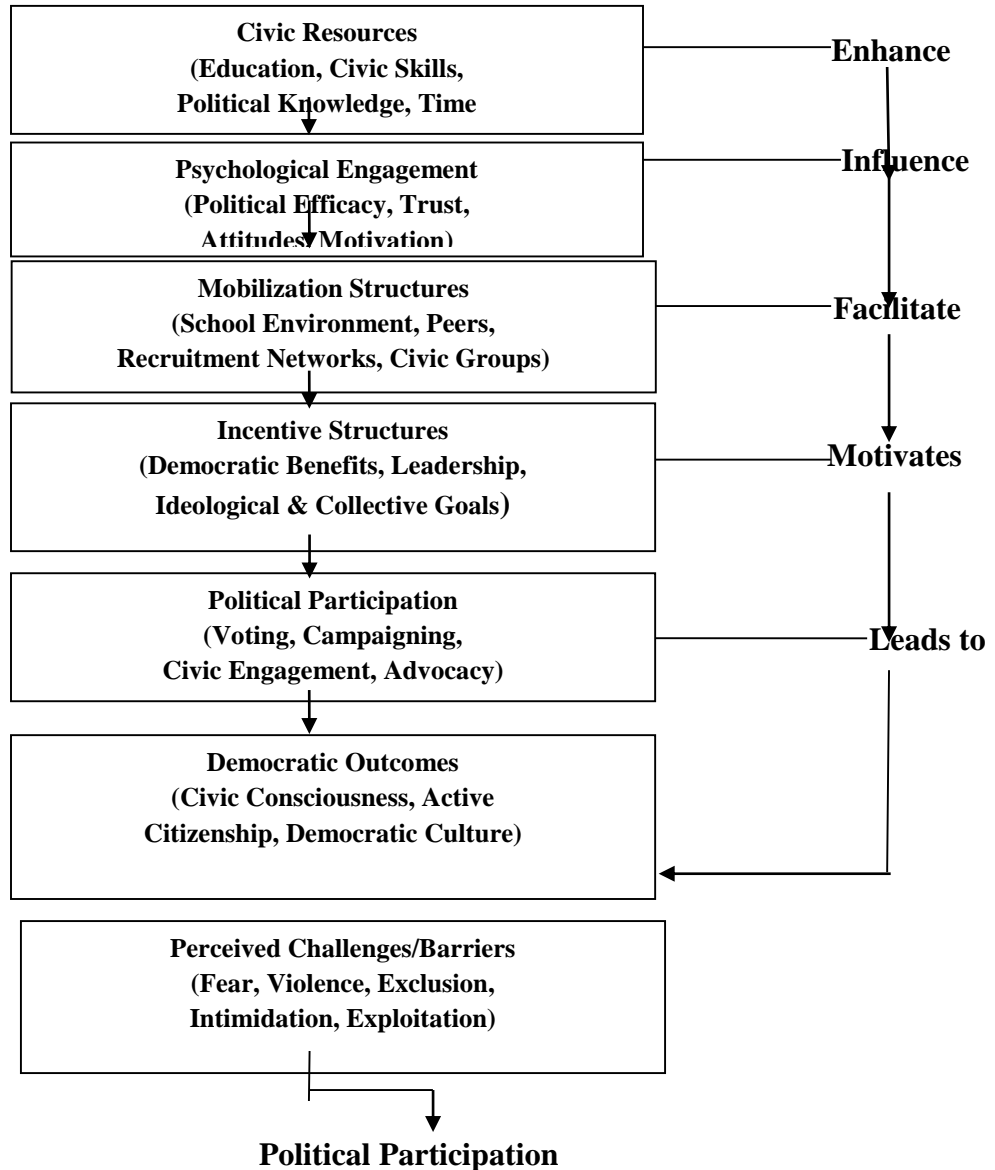


Figure 1 – Conceptualising Students’ Political Participation and Perceived Challenges

The framework as seen in figure 1 conceptualizes political participation as a product of the interaction among civic resources, psychological engagement, mobilization opportunities, incentive structures, and sociopolitical barriers. Civic resources such as education, civic skills, political knowledge, and access to democratic information influence students’ awareness and capacity for participation. Psychological factors, including political efficacy, trust, motivation, attitudes, and democratic orientation, shape students’ willingness to engage in political processes.

The framework (see figure 1) further posits that mobilization structures, including peer influence, school environment, civic organizations, political campaigns, and recruitment networks, create opportunities that either encourage or discourage political participation. Simultaneously, students evaluate political participation based on expected incentives, including democratic benefits, civic recognition, leadership opportunities, ideological commitments, and collective societal outcomes. However, participation (refer to figure 1) is constrained by perceived sociopolitical challenges such as fear of victimization, intimidation, insults, political violence, exclusion, discrimination, and exploitation. These barriers negatively influence students' confidence, political efficacy, and practical engagement in democratic activities.

Consequently, the framework in figure 1 assumes that meaningful political participation among students emerges when civic resources, democratic socialization, mobilization opportunities, and participation incentives outweigh the perceived barriers to democratic engagement.

The framework illustrates that students' political participation is influenced by a combination of civic resources, psychological orientations, mobilization opportunities, and incentive structures derived from the reviewed political participation models. Democratic education and civic socialization equip students with political knowledge and civic skills necessary for participation. Psychological engagement strengthens political efficacy and democratic consciousness, while mobilization structures create opportunities for involvement in political activities.

The framework (relate to figure 1) further demonstrates that participation is reinforced when students perceive political engagement as beneficial, meaningful, and socially rewarding. However, perceived barriers such as political intimidation, fear, violence, exclusion, and exploitation weaken students' willingness to engage in democratic activities. The framework therefore explains how democratic idealism translates into practical political engagement or disengagement among senior high school students in Ghana.

Conceptual Review of Political Participation

Political participation remains a fundamental pillar of democratic governance and active citizenship. Within democratic societies, participation extends beyond the mere exercise of political rights to encompass citizens' active engagement in governance, public affairs, and collective decision-making processes. Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley (as cited in Simon, 2008) conceptualized political participation as a civic responsibility that sustains democratic society through active involvement in political and public affairs. Similarly, Segal (2000) argued that political participation strengthens social solidarity, promotes civic integration, and enhances individuals' identification with the broader political community.

The concept of political participation has, however, generated substantial scholarly debate regarding its scope and definitional boundaries. White (1993) described political participation as an indispensable requirement for meaningful democracy, while Birch (1993, as cited in Schlosser, 2005) defined it as the active involvement of citizens in the processes through which political

leaders are selected and public policies are formulated and implemented. Huntington (1991) further expanded the concept by emphasizing participation and contestation as the two essential dimensions of democratic engagement, incorporating freedoms of speech, assembly, publication, and electoral competition within democratic systems.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes political participation as both an instrument of democratic empowerment and a mechanism for state accountability. Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie (1993) argued that political participation enables citizens to exercise influence over governance processes and hold political leaders accountable. Conversely, Parry, Moyser, and Day (1992) cautioned that participation may also reproduce existing social inequalities and reinforce political dominance within democratic systems. This dual perspective reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of political participation across societies and historical contexts. Van Deth (2001) and Lamprianou and Demetriou (2013) further observed that political participation is not static but continuously evolves in response to social transformation, technological development, and changing political environments.

The literature broadly categorizes political participation into conventional and unconventional forms. Conventional political participation refers to institutionalized democratic activities such as voting, political campaigning, party membership, contesting elections, and participation in formal political processes (Conway, 2000; Barnes, 2004). These activities are generally regulated and legitimized by the state and democratic institutions (Segal, 2005; Sanghera, 2005).

Unconventional political participation, on the other hand, encompasses extra-institutional forms of engagement such as protests, demonstrations, petitions, strikes, political blogging, barricades, and civic activism (Segal, 2005; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). Bourne (2010) further identified confrontational political actions, including demonstrations and resistance activities, as unconventional forms of participation often employed by marginalized groups seeking political visibility. Although some unconventional activities may be perceived as confrontational or illegal, scholars argue that they remain important democratic mechanisms for expressing dissent and influencing public policy (Marsh, 1990; Riley, Griffin, & Morey, 2010).

Political participation may also be understood through direct and indirect dimensions. Pausch (2012) defined direct political participation as active engagement motivated by explicit political interests, including voting, party membership, demonstrations, and electoral campaigning. Indirect political participation refers to voluntary involvement in social networks, civic associations, cultural groups, and community initiatives that may not have immediate political objectives but nevertheless influence societal values and governance structures (Sen, 1999). Putnam (1993) argued that such forms of civic engagement contribute significantly to social capital formation and democratic development.

The literature further identifies several principles underpinning effective political participation, including inclusiveness, transparency, equal partnership, empowerment, cooperation, shared

responsibility, and participatory decision-making (Duriappah, Roddy, & Parry, 2005; Egger & Majeres, 1998). Participation therefore extends beyond involvement in political activities to include democratic empowerment, social inclusion, and equitable access to decision-making processes. Different degrees of participation also exist, ranging from passive participation and consultation to interactive participation, partnership, and self-mobilization (Kanji & Greenwood, 2001). These varying levels demonstrate the complexity and multidimensionality of democratic participation within modern societies.

Empirical literature consistently identifies education, gender, age, socioeconomic status, civic resources, and environmental factors as major determinants of political participation. Vecchione and Caprara (2009) found that education, age, and gender significantly influence political engagement, with highly educated and older individuals often demonstrating greater participation levels. Verba et al. (1995) similarly identified education as one of the strongest predictors of political participation due to its influence on civic competence and political efficacy. Although gender disparities in political participation have gradually narrowed in many democratic societies, Conway (2001) maintained that males still demonstrate relatively higher levels of political engagement than females in many political contexts.

More recent scholarship has shifted attention toward contextual and environmental determinants of participation. McClurg (2002) emphasized the role of social networks and environmental influences in shaping civic engagement, while Pattie et al. (2004) argued that political apathy among marginalized groups often reinforces social exclusion and democratic inequality. Consequently, political participation is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction between individual characteristics, democratic institutions, socialization processes, civic opportunities, and broader sociopolitical contexts.

Empirical Perspectives on the Challenges of Political Participation

Empirical scholarship on political participation has increasingly emphasized the role of civic engagement, democratic socialization, and youth participation in sustaining democratic governance. Political participation is widely recognized as a fundamental dimension of civic engagement and democratic citizenship (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) argued that democracy becomes inconceivable in the absence of citizens' freedom and willingness to participate actively in governance processes. Empirical studies have traditionally conceptualized political participation primarily in terms of electoral engagement, including voting, political campaigning, political discussions, and staying informed about political issues (Obradovic & Masten, 2007). However, contemporary research increasingly acknowledges broader and more inclusive forms of political participation beyond conventional electoral activities.

Several empirical studies have demonstrated that young people often engage more actively in informal and non-institutional forms of participation than in conventional political activities. Metzger and Smetana (2009) argued that participation in civic organizations, volunteerism, digital

activism, and community engagement constitutes important dimensions of contemporary youth participation. Similarly, Haste and Hogan (2006) observed that while voting remains central to representative democracy, it represents only a limited and infrequent form of engagement for many citizens, particularly young people. Consequently, increasing scholarly attention has focused on alternative democratic practices through which citizens' express opinions, influence policies, and participate in collective civic action.

Empirical evidence further suggests that young people increasingly prefer informal and issue-based participation over traditional political engagement. Amnå (2012) found that contemporary youth demonstrate declining interest in formal political structures while increasingly engaging in expressive and non-conventional forms of participation. This shift reflects broader transformations in democratic participation associated with technological advancement, social media, and changing civic identities. Empirical research therefore suggests that political participation among youth has become increasingly diversified and multidimensional.

Given the limited opportunities available to adolescents for direct electoral participation, several studies have focused on political intentions, expectations, and civic orientations as predictors of future political engagement. Flanagan, Syvertsen, and Stout (2007) as well as Hooghe and Wilkenfeld (2008) argued that adolescents' intentions to participate politically are significant predictors of future democratic involvement. Granberg and Holmberg (1990) similarly established a strong relationship between voting intentions and actual voting behaviour, indicating that civic attitudes formed during adolescence often persist into adulthood.

Longitudinal studies further reveal that political attitudes, civic orientations, and participation behaviours exhibit substantial stability across the life course. Jennings and Stoker (2004) found that political ideologies, participation patterns, and civic attitudes developed during adolescence frequently persist into adulthood. However, Hooghe and Wilkenfeld (2008) reported mixed findings regarding the extent to which adolescent participation intentions directly predict long-term political engagement, suggesting that contextual and institutional factors may influence participation trajectories over time.

Empirical literature also highlights the growing significance of civic engagement activities such as volunteerism, community service, and youth organizations in shaping democratic participation among young people. Flanagan (2004) and Sherrod et al. (2002) emphasized that participation in volunteer activities and community service enables young people to develop civic responsibility, social commitment, and collective identity beyond individual self-interest. Such activities provide opportunities for youth to contribute meaningfully to community development and democratic processes.

Nevertheless, some scholars caution against equating volunteerism with political participation. Walker (2002) argued that youth engagement in community service often remains disconnected from broader political involvement and democratic activism. Similarly, Obradovic and Masten

(2007) found that volunteerism and electoral participation constitute distinct forms of civic engagement that may not necessarily predict one another. These findings suggest that while community service contributes to civic development, it may not automatically translate into active political participation.

Empirical studies examining the determinants of political participation consistently identify education, gender, age, socioeconomic status, political efficacy, and social networks as significant predictors of democratic engagement. Verba et al. (1995) emphasized that education remains one of the strongest predictors of political participation because it enhances civic skills, political knowledge, and democratic competence. Stolle and Hooghe (2009) similarly identified education and social capital as critical variables shaping political engagement among young people.

Gender differences in political participation have also received substantial empirical attention. Barnes (2004) and Lamprianou and Demetriou (2013) found that men traditionally demonstrate higher levels of political participation than women, although these disparities have narrowed considerably in many democratic societies. Dolder, Vinnicombe, Gaughan, and Sealy (2012) further noted that women's participation in political leadership and public decision-making remains comparatively lower even within advanced democracies. Greene (2005) attributed lower female participation partly to low political confidence, structural inequalities, and social barriers. In the African context, empirical studies continue to highlight challenges confronting youth participation in democratic governance. Political exclusion, unemployment, weak civic institutions, corruption, intimidation, and limited political efficacy remain significant barriers affecting youth engagement across many developing democracies. These constraints weaken democratic inclusion and reduce young people's trust in political systems and governance institutions.

Overall, empirical literature demonstrates that political participation among young people is shaped by complex interactions among civic education, democratic socialization, institutional opportunities, political efficacy, social networks, and sociopolitical contexts. Existing evidence further suggests that youth participation increasingly extends beyond conventional electoral politics toward broader forms of civic and democratic engagement. However, persistent structural, psychological, and institutional barriers continue to undermine meaningful political participation among young people, particularly within developing democratic contexts.

Empirical Review of Education and Political Participation

The relationship between education and political participation remains one of the most extensively examined themes within political science and civic engagement literature. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that educational attainment significantly influences citizens' levels of political awareness, civic competence, democratic engagement, and participation in governance processes. Croke, Grossman, Larreguy, and Marshall (2015) identified education as one of the strongest predictors of political participation within contemporary political science scholarship. Similarly, Hillygus (2005, p. 68) described the relationship between education and political

participation as “largely uncontested,” while Putnam (1995, p. 68) argued that education constitutes “the best individual level predictor of participation.”

For several decades, empirical studies have consistently shown that highly educated individuals are more likely to vote, engage in political campaigns, participate in civic discussions, and demonstrate sustained democratic engagement than less educated individuals (Hillygus, 2005; Schlozman, 2002). Scholars generally attribute this relationship to the civic skills, political knowledge, and participatory competencies acquired through formal education. Verba et al. (1995) argued that education not only increases political participation directly but also equips citizens with the civic capacities required to communicate effectively with political leaders and institutions. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993, p. 136) further emphasized that education “imparts the knowledge and skills most essential to a citizen’s task,” enabling individuals to understand political issues, evaluate candidates, follow political campaigns, and participate meaningfully in democratic processes. From this perspective, formal education serves as a critical mechanism for democratic socialization and civic empowerment.

Despite this widely accepted relationship, empirical findings have also generated important debates regarding the causal effects of education on political participation. Berinsky and Lenz (2011) observed that increasing levels of educational attainment in the United States have not consistently translated into proportional increases in political participation, particularly in voter turnout and civic engagement. Brody (1978) earlier identified this paradox by questioning why rising educational levels had failed to produce corresponding increases in democratic participation. These observations challenge the assumption that educational attainment alone automatically enhances political engagement.

Consequently, some scholars argue that education may function less as a direct causal factor and more as an indicator of underlying social, cognitive, and psychological characteristics associated with political engagement. Kam and Palmer (2008) contended that education may reflect broader pre-adult experiences, social status, cognitive abilities, and personality traits that predispose individuals toward civic participation. Berinsky and Lenz (2010) similarly argued that educational attainment often serves as a proxy for motivation, civic orientation, and participatory dispositions developed prior to adulthood.

Nonetheless, substantial empirical evidence continues to support the positive influence of education on political participation. Dee (2004) found that educational attainment significantly increases the likelihood of political participation and civic involvement. Likewise, Milligan, Moretti, and Oreopoulos (2004) demonstrated that compulsory education laws and increased educational attainment positively affect voting participation and democratic engagement.

Beyond formal classroom instruction, education also contributes indirectly to political participation through extracurricular and institutional experiences. Goetz (2003) explained that education promotes political engagement by providing opportunities for leadership development,

communication skills acquisition, organizational experience, cooperation, and civic apprenticeship through activities such as student governance, school clubs, sports, and student publications. Educational institutions therefore function not only as centres of academic learning but also as critical environments for democratic socialization and civic capacity building.

Furthermore, education enhances access to socioeconomic opportunities, professional networks, civic organizations, and associational life, all of which reinforce political participation and democratic inclusion (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011). Consequently, empirical literature overwhelmingly suggests that education remains a central determinant of political participation by shaping individuals' civic competencies, democratic attitudes, political efficacy, and access to participatory opportunities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research methodology through the application of a descriptive cross-sectional survey design to democratic idealism to practical reality: examining senior high school students' perceived challenges toward political participation in the Cape Coast metropolis of Ghana. The quantitative approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates the systematic collection and statistical analysis of data from a relatively large population. The descriptive survey design was selected due to its effectiveness in examining and describing prevailing conditions, attitudes, and characteristics without manipulating the study variables (Grimes & Shulz, 2002). Polit and Hungler (1995) asserted that descriptive studies are valuable for documenting and interpreting phenomena in their natural settings, while Babbie (1990) emphasized that such designs permit broader generalizations from sampled populations. Additionally, the cross-sectional survey design enabled the collection of data at a single point in time, thereby providing a snapshot of students' political understanding and participation patterns efficiently and economically (Levin, 2006). The target population consisted of 15,998 students enrolled in ten public senior high schools within the Cape Coast Metropolis.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with internationally recognized ethical principles guiding studies involving human participants. Ethical clearance for the study was granted through the postgraduate research approval processes of the Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, University of Cape Coast, under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Directorate of Research, Innovation and Consultancy (DRIC). The study was approved with ethical reference number DASSE/ED/PCT/14/0013. Furthermore, administrative permission was obtained from the authorities of the selected senior high schools before the commencement of fieldwork to ensure institutional collaboration and adherence to approved ethical research procedures.

Informed Consent

Before the field data collection process commenced, official authorization was obtained through a formal introductory letter issued by the Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, College of Education Studies, University of Cape Coast, and submitted to the management of the selected senior high schools to facilitate institutional access and cooperation. Participants were adequately informed about the purpose, procedures, and relevance of the study prior to the administration of the research instrument. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents provided informed consent before taking part in the study. Participants were also assured of strict confidentiality, anonymity, and the exclusive academic use of the information collected. Throughout the research process, ethical standards relating to privacy, voluntary participation, data security, and responsible handling of information were rigorously maintained.

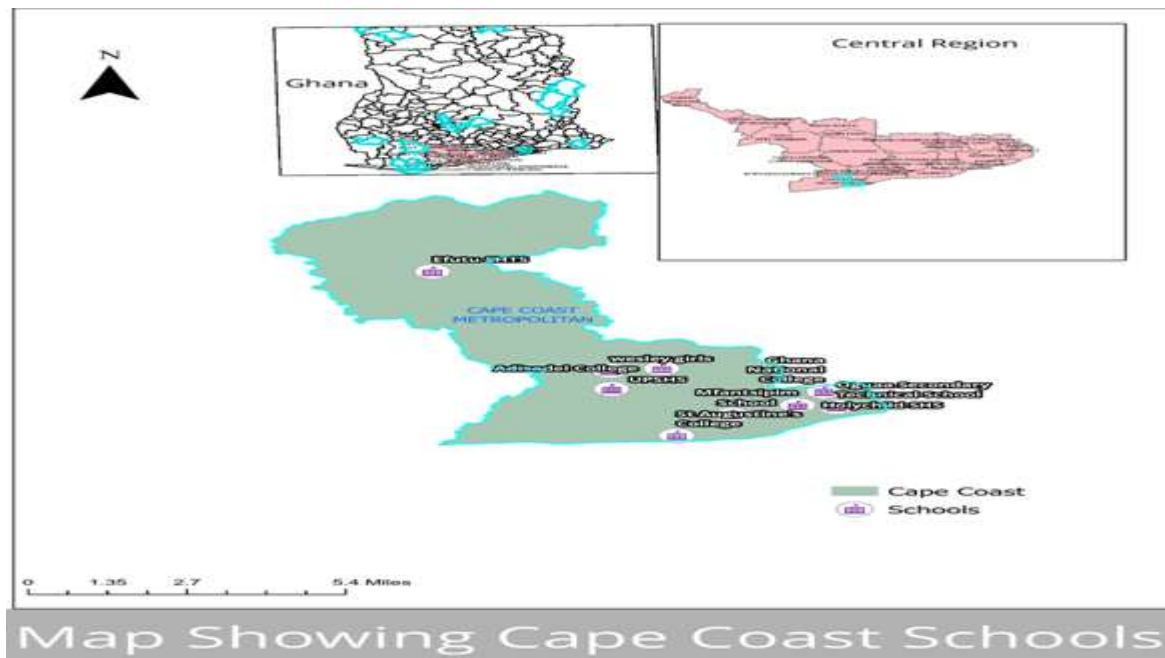


Figure 2 - Map of Study Area

Population of the Study

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the target population across public senior high schools within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The study population consisted of 15,998 students enrolled in ten public senior high schools, comprising students from SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3 levels. Variations in enrolment figures were observed across the different schools and grade levels, providing a broad and representative population framework for the study. The population composition served as the basis for the stratified sampling strategy adopted to ensure proportional representation of respondents according to school, gender, and educational level.

Table 1 – *Population Distribution of Students in the Cape Coast Metropolis*

Name of School	SHS 1		SHS2		SHS 3		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Wesley Girls' High School	0	532	0	425	0	413	1370
University Practice SHS	237	263	189	239	173	147	1248
Oguaa Snr. High Technical	216	212	150	177	179	152	1086
St. Augustine's College	655	0	497	0	522	0	1674
Academy of Christ the K.	238	299	201	218	135	144	1235
Adisadel College	614	0	569	0	551	0	1734
Ghana National College	391	651	370	509	282	430	2633
Holy Child SHS	0	453	0	379	0	370	1202
Efutu Secondary / Tech	302	304	250	255	201	201	1513
Mfantshipim SHS	915	0	729	0	659	0	2303
Total of all SHS students	3568	2714	2955	2202	2702	1857	15,998

Ghana Education Service, Metropolitan Education office (2015)

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The determination of the study sample was guided by the sample size estimation table proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Based on a target population of 15,998 students, the table recommended a minimum sample of 375 participants at a 95% confidence interval and a 5% margin of error. To improve the robustness, reliability, and representativeness of the findings, the study sampled 400 respondents.

A stratified random sampling approach was adopted to ensure adequate representation of students from the ten public senior high schools within the Cape Coast Metropolis. Bryman (2004) noted that stratified sampling enhances representativeness by ensuring the inclusion of relevant subgroups within a population. Accordingly, the population was categorized according to school type, gender, academic level (SHS 1–SHS 3), and programme of study. Following the stratification

process, proportional allocation procedures were applied to determine the number of respondents selected from each subgroup. Subsequently, simple random sampling techniques were employed to select participants from the various strata, thereby ensuring equal selection opportunities for all students (Acquah, 2009).

Distribution of Respondents Across Selected Schools

Table 2 illustrates the allocation of respondents across the sampled senior high schools within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The study involved 400 students drawn from ten public senior high schools, including 156 students from SHS 1, 130 from SHS 2, and 114 from SHS 3. Ghana National College contributed the largest proportion of respondents (66), followed by Mfantshipim School with 58 participants, whereas Oguaa Secondary Technical School recorded the smallest representation with 27 respondents. The proportional allocation of participants across schools and academic levels strengthened the representativeness, balance, and credibility of the study outcomes.

Table 2 – *Distribution of Students for Each School*

Senior High Schools	Sample Size	SHS1	SHS2	SHS 3
Wesley Girls SHS	34	13	11	10
University Practice SHS	31	12	11	8
Oguaa Snr. Tech. School	27	11	8	8
St. Augustine's College	42	17	12	13
Academy of Christ the King	31	13	11	7
Adisadel College	43	15	14	14
Ghana National College	66	26	22	18
Holy Child SHS	30	11	10	9
Efutu SHS	38	15	13	10
Mfantshipim School	58	23	18	17
Total	400	156	130	114

Source: Field data, 2015.

Distribution of Respondents by School

Table 3 indicates that 400 students participated in the study, with respondents proportionately drawn from the selected senior high schools within the Cape Coast Metropolis. Ghana National College recorded the largest proportion of participants, whereas Oguaa Secondary Technical

School contributed the smallest number of respondents. The proportional allocation of participants across the various schools enhanced the representativeness, dependability, and generalizability of the study findings.

Table 3 – *Distribution of Students by Schools*

Name of School	No	%
Wesley Girls Senior High School	34	8.5
University Practice Senior High School	31	7.8
Oguaa Secondary Technical High School	27	6.8
Saint Augustine's College	42	10.5
Academy of Christ the King SHS	31	7.8
Ghana National College	66	16.5
Holy Child Senior High School	30	7.5
Efutu Secondary Technical High School	38	9.5
Mfantshipim Senior High School	58	14.5
Adisadel College	43	10.8
Total	400	100

Source: Field data, 2016.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 4 summarizes the demographic profile of the respondents, including gender, age, educational level, and programme of study among senior high school students within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The findings indicate that 230 (57.5%) of the participants were male students, whereas 170 (42.5%) were female students, reflecting a comparatively higher male enrolment during the 2015/2016 academic year.

Table 4 – *Demography of Respondents*

Variable	Subscale	No.	%
Gender	Male	230	57.5
	Female	170	42.5
Age	14 – 15 years	85	21.3
	16 – 17 years	236	59.0
	18 – 19 years	71	17.8
	20 years and above	8	2.0
Form	SHS 1	156	39.0
	SHS 2	130	32.5
	SHS 3	114	28.5
Programme	Science	121	30.0
	Business	64	34.0
	General Arts	135	16.0
	Visual Arts	33	8.0
	Home Economics	34	9.0
	Technical	13	3.0

Source: Field data, 2016.

The demographic distribution as seen in Table 4 further suggests increasing recognition among parents and students regarding the value of secondary education, as evidenced by the substantial student enrolment at the senior high school level. Regarding programme specialization, 135 (34.0%) respondents were enrolled in General Arts, 121 (30.0%) studied Science, 64 (16.0%) pursued Business, 34 (9.0%) offered Home Economics, 33 (8.0%) studied Visual Arts, while 13 (3.0%) were enrolled in technical programmes. The relatively (see Table 4) high enrolment in General Arts and Science may reflect prevailing academic preferences and the dominant orientation of Ghana's educational structure toward grammar-based education. In contrast, the comparatively low participation in Technical, Visual Arts, and Home Economics programmes may indicate limited interest and lower patronage of technical and vocational educational pathways among students.

Research Instrument

Data for the study were gathered through a researcher-developed structured questionnaire consisting of closed-ended items designed on a five-point Likert scale format (Sarantakos, 2005). The instrument was organized into four major sections addressing respondents' demographic information, understanding of political participation, perceived benefits of political participation, and gender-related dimensions of political engagement. To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted, yielding an overall Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .811, which indicated a satisfactory level of internal consistency and reliability for the study instrument (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The questionnaires were administered personally by the researcher with the assistance of designated teachers in the selected senior high schools. The completed instruments were retrieved immediately after administration, resulting in a full response rate of 100%. Participants were allocated approximately thirty minutes to complete the questionnaire; however, additional time was provided where necessary to ensure accurate and complete responses. Incomplete items were promptly addressed during the data collection process to enhance the validity and reliability of the data obtained. Following the field exercise, the instrument produced an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .862, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

After data collection, responses were coded, screened, and entered the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 for analysis. The data were subsequently cleaned, organized, and analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and examine students' perceptions regarding the challenges associated with political participation. Inferential statistics were also employed to test the study hypotheses. Specifically, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether statistically significant differences existed in students' understanding of political participation based on age and grade level (form).

Data Analysis and Interpretation of Results

Data were collected using a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire administered to senior high school students within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The response options were assigned numerical values as follows: Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Undecided = 3, Agree = 4, and Strongly Agree = 5. Interpretation of the mean scores was guided by established decision intervals, where mean values ranging from 0.0 to 1.4 represented strong disagreement, values between 1.5 and 3.4 indicated disagreement or neutrality, and mean scores from 3.5 to 5.0 reflected agreement with the statements presented.

Standard deviation statistics were further utilized to assess the degree of variation in respondents' opinions. Standard deviation values below 1.0 suggested relative uniformity and consistency in

participants' responses, whereas values exceeding 1.0 indicated greater variability and divergence in respondents' views regarding the issues examined in the study.

Students' Perceptions of the Challenges Associated with Political Participation

This research question examined senior high school students' perceptions regarding the barriers and difficulties influencing their participation in political activities within the Cape Coast Metropolis. Specifically, the study sought to determine the various factors that hinder students' effective involvement in political participation and democratic engagement. The responses obtained from the participants concerning these perceived challenges are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 – Students' Perceptions of the Challenges Associated with Political Participation

Statements	Mean	SD
Lack of money, access to transport, childcare support plus a lack of knowledge of how to get involved can all be barriers to participation	3.84	1.241
Low educational attainment and a lack of a voice as well as caring for responsibilities can make it difficult for women to get involved	3.86	1.140
Women from more deprived backgrounds often experience low self-confidence which acts as a barrier to their participation	3.93	1.158
Gender inequalities affect low participation of women in politics	3.90	1.225
Disability of many forms does not favour all citizens to participate in politics	3.72	1.225
Unequal distribution of power affects the rate of political participation	3.65	1.278

Source: Field data, 2016.

Table 5, Continued.

Statements	Mean	SD
Fear of acceptance, insults, disregard, exclusion, exploitation, and violence stops individual from participating	4.06	1.123
People from lower socio-economic groups often have less access to resources and practical support making participation difficult	3.81	1.191
Ethnicity affects the rate and level of participation in politics	3.76	1.128
The feeling of doubts and uncertainty about the essence of participation	3.54	1.335
Corruption practices and inequality in the representation of people and unfair public participatory process undermine democratic values	4.07	1.127
If citizen participants are misled into thinking that their decisions will be implemented, then the decisions are ignored bitterness will develop over time which can lead to disputes	3.95	1.175
Heavy time – commitments affect citizen participation	3.95	1.175
Total Means / Std. Dev	49.43	15.66
Mean of Means / Std	3.80	1.20

Source: Field data, 2016.

Analysis and interpretation of Results

The findings revealed that senior high school students perceived several structural, psychological, and socioeconomic barriers as significant challenges to political participation. Respondents generally agreed that inadequate financial resources, limited access to transportation, insufficient civic knowledge, and lack of institutional support hinder active involvement in political processes ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.241$). Students further acknowledged that low educational attainment, restricted opportunities for expression, and domestic responsibilities particularly constrain women's participation in politics ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.140$). Similarly, respondents agreed that low self-confidence among women from disadvantaged backgrounds negatively affects political engagement ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.158$).

The results additionally demonstrated that fear of rejection, intimidation, insults, exclusion, exploitation, and political violence constitute major deterrents to participation ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.123$). Respondents also perceived corruption, unequal representation, and unfair participatory structures as factors undermining democratic participation and political trust ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.127$). Furthermore, participants agreed that disregard for citizens' views and failure to implement collective decisions often generate dissatisfaction and political disillusionment ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.175$). The relatively high standard deviation values across most variables indicate heterogeneous responses, suggesting varying experiences and perceptions among students regarding political participation challenges.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings demonstrate that students' political participation is constrained by multidimensional barriers involving socioeconomic inequalities, gender disparities, psychological fears, institutional weaknesses, and governance-related challenges. The identification of financial constraints, limited access to resources, and inadequate civic support aligns with the findings of Low, Butt, Ellis, and Smith (2007), who argued that poverty, transportation difficulties, and lack of institutional guidance significantly undermine political engagement.

The study further confirms Rai's (2008) assertion that low educational attainment, restricted voice, and caregiving responsibilities disproportionately limit women's participation in democratic processes. Similarly, the findings support Greene's (2005) argument that women from deprived backgrounds often experience low self-confidence, thereby weakening their political involvement. The results also corroborate Conway (2001), Lamprianou and Demetriou (2013), and the Hansard Society (2012), who observed that gender inequalities continue to influence participation disparities despite increasing democratic inclusion.

Moreover, the finding that fear, exclusion, violence, and intimidation discourage political engagement supports Hogg and Vaughan's (2011) explanation that fear of rejection and social alienation often suppress participation within democratic groups. The findings also reinforce Warren's (2013) argument that corruption undermines democratic norms, political trust,

accountability, and citizens' willingness to participate in governance processes. Overall, the study demonstrates that students are highly aware of the institutional and sociopolitical barriers that undermine effective democratic participation within contemporary society.

Differences in Students' Understanding of Political Participation in Terms of Age

Hypothesis one examined whether significant differences existed in senior high school students' understanding of political participation across different age categories within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The hypothesis stated that there is no statistically significant difference in students' understanding of political participation based on age. To test this hypothesis, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted at a 0.05 level of significance. In this analysis, students' age categories constituted the independent variable, while students' mean scores on understanding of political participation served as the dependent variable. The analysis was performed to determine whether variations in age significantly influenced students' perceptions and understanding of political participation.

Table 6 - One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Students' Understanding of Political Participation by Age

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between Groups	1.868	3	0.623	2.550	.055
Within Groups	96.705	396	0.244		
Total	98.573	399			

Note. $p > .05$, indicating no statistically significant difference in students' understanding of political participation across age groups.

Table 6 presents the results of the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) conducted to examine whether significant differences existed in senior high school students' understanding of political participation across different age groups within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The findings revealed a between-group sum of squares of 1.868 and a within-group sum of squares of 96.705, resulting in an F-value of 2.550 with a corresponding probability value of .055. Since the obtained p -value exceeded the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was retained. This indicates that no statistically significant differences existed in students' understanding of political participation based on age categories. The results therefore suggest that respondents across the various age groups demonstrated relatively similar levels of political awareness and understanding regarding political participation.

Table 7 - Robust Tests of Equality of Means for Students' Understanding of Political Participation by Age

Test	Statistic	df1	df2	P	P
Welch	2.426	3	32.196	2.550	.084

Note. Welch's robust test confirmed that there was no statistically significant difference in students' understanding of political participation across age categories, $p > .05$.

Table 7 presents the Welch robust test of equality of means conducted to confirm the ANOVA results regarding students' understanding of political participation across age categories. The Welch statistic produced a value of 2.426 with degrees of freedom of 3 and 32.196 and a significance value of .084. Since the probability value was greater than the .05 threshold, the robust test further confirmed that there were no statistically significant differences in students' understanding of political participation across the different age groups. The findings reinforce the conclusion that age did not significantly influence students' political understanding within the study context.

Analysis and Interpretation of Results

The one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results revealed no statistically significant difference in senior high school students' understanding of political participation across the various age categories, $F(3, 396) = 2.550, p = .055$. Since the probability value exceeded the .05 significance threshold, the null hypothesis was retained. This finding indicates that students' age did not significantly influence their understanding of political participation within the Cape Coast Metropolis.

The results suggest that students, irrespective of age differences, demonstrated relatively similar levels of political awareness and understanding. The robustness test of equality of means further confirmed the absence of statistically significant differences among the age groups. The findings may be attributed to the relatively narrow age range among the respondents, which likely minimized substantial differences in political exposure, civic experiences, and democratic socialization. Consequently, age variations among the students did not produce meaningful differences in their perceptions and understanding of political participation.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings challenge several traditional assumptions within political participation literature that age significantly influences political understanding and civic engagement. Existing scholarship, particularly Barnes (2004), suggests that political participation generally increases with age because maturity, life experiences, and psychological development enhance individuals' political awareness and democratic engagement. Similarly, Lamprianou and Demetriou (2013) argued that age and social experience shape individuals' political reasoning, civic habits, and participatory behaviour.

However, the current findings revealed no statistically significant age-related differences in students' understanding of political participation. This outcome may be explained by the relatively homogeneous educational environment and similar civic exposure shared by the respondents within the senior high school setting. The findings further support Lamprianou and Demetriou's (2013) argument that age alone may not sufficiently predict political understanding without considering contextual variables such as educational background, socialization processes, and environmental influences.

The findings also contrast with studies by Molomo (2000), Villalón (2004), and Kuenzi and Lambright (2007), which reported lower political participation among younger populations due to limited civic maturity and political exposure. Conversely, the present study suggests that contemporary democratic education and civic awareness initiatives may be gradually reducing age-based disparities in political understanding among students. Overall, the findings imply that political understanding among senior high school students is shaped more by shared educational and social experiences than by age differences alone.

Students' Understanding of Political Participation According to Educational Level (Grade / Form)

Hypothesis Two examined whether statistically significant differences existed in senior high school students' understanding of political participation based on their educational level (form) within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The hypothesis stated that there is no statistically significant difference in students' understanding of political participation across the various forms of study. The hypothesis was formulated to determine whether students' progression through the senior high school system influenced their political awareness and understanding of democratic participation. To test this hypothesis, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted at a 0.05 level of significance. In the analysis, students' educational level (SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3) constituted the independent variable, while students' mean scores on understanding of political participation served as the dependent variable. The ANOVA procedure was employed to determine whether significant variations existed in political understanding among students across the different educational levels.

Table 8 - Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variance for Students' Understanding of Political Participation by Educational Level (Form / Grade)

Variable	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	P
Understanding of Political Participation	1.546	2	397	.214

Note. $p > .05$ indicates that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was not violated.

Table 8 presents the results of Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variance conducted to assess whether the variance in students' understanding of political participation was equal across the various educational levels (forms). The findings revealed a Levene statistic of 1.546 with a significance value of .214. Since the obtained probability value exceeded the .05 significance level, the assumption of equal variances was satisfied. This indicates that the variances among the different forms were statistically homogeneous, thereby confirming the appropriateness of conducting the one-way ANOVA.

Table 9 - One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Students' Understanding of Political Participation by Educational Level (Form)

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Between Groups	0.344	2	0.172	2.694	.500
Within Groups	98.229	397	0.247		
Total	98.573	399			

Note. $p > .05$, indicating no statistically significant difference in students' understanding of political participation across educational levels (Grade / form).

Table 9 presents the results of the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) conducted to determine whether significant differences existed in students' understanding of political participation across the various educational levels (SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3). The analysis produced an F-value of 0.694 with a corresponding significance value of .500. Since the probability value exceeded the .05 threshold, the null hypothesis was retained. The findings therefore indicate that students' educational level did not significantly influence their understanding of political participation. This suggests that students across different forms demonstrate relatively similar levels of political awareness and understanding.

Table 10 - Robust Test of Equality of Means for Students' Understanding of Political Participation by Educational Level (Grade / Form)

Test	Statistic	df1	df2	P
Welch	1.546	2	252.93	.455

Note. Welch's robust test confirmed that there was no statistically significant difference in students' understanding of political participation across educational levels, $p > .05$.

Table 10 presents the Welch robust test of equality of means conducted to validate the ANOVA findings regarding students' understanding of political participation across educational levels. The Welch statistics yielded a value of 0.791 with a significance level of .455. Since the obtained probability value was greater than .05, the results confirmed the absence of statistically significant differences in students' understanding of political participation across SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3. The findings reinforce the conclusion that students' educational level did not significantly affect their political understanding within the study context.

Analysis and Interpretation of Results

The one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results presented in Tables 8, 9, and 10 revealed no statistically significant difference in senior high school students' understanding of political participation across the different educational levels (grade / form), $F(2, 397) = 0.694$, $p = .500$. Since the probability value exceeded the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was retained. The findings indicate that students' educational level, whether SHS 1, SHS 2, or SHS 3, did not significantly influence their understanding of political participation within the Cape Coast Metropolis.

Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variance further confirmed that the assumption of equal variances was not violated, $p = .214$, while the Welch robust test of equality of means equally showed no statistically significant differences among the groups, $p = .455$. These findings suggest that students across the various educational levels demonstrated relatively similar levels of political awareness, democratic understanding, and perceptions regarding political participation. The results may imply that students within the senior high school environment are exposed to comparable civic education experiences, democratic discussions, and sociopolitical information regardless of their educational progression.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The findings challenge traditional assumptions within political participation literature that higher educational advancement necessarily leads to increased political understanding and democratic engagement. Existing scholarship, particularly Verba and Nie (as cited in Whiteley & Seyd, 2002), emphasized that education constitutes a significant predictor of political participation because it enhances civic competence, political efficacy, and psychological involvement in democratic processes. Similarly, Verba et al. (1995), Brady, Verba, and Schlozman (1995), and Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) argued that education improves individuals' civic skills, political awareness, and capacity for democratic participation.

Contrary to these perspectives, the present findings revealed that students across SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3 demonstrated relatively similar levels of political understanding. This outcome supports Putnam's (2010) argument that increasing educational opportunities do not automatically translate into higher civic and political engagement. The findings also align with Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi (2005), who contended that within African contexts, education and socioeconomic status may not consistently predict political participation due to broader structural and contextual influences.

Furthermore, the results reinforce Lamprianou and Demetriou's (2013) position that political understanding cannot be explained solely by educational progression without considering contextual variables such as socialization, environmental exposure, and access to civic information. Although previous studies by Vecchione and Caprara (2009) and Stolle and Hooghe (2009) identified education as an important determinant of political participation, the current findings suggest that students within similar educational environments may develop relatively comparable political awareness irrespective of class level. Overall, the study implies that shared institutional experiences and exposure to civic education within the senior high school setting may have minimized differences in political understanding across the various forms.

FINDINGS

The study revealed that senior high school students perceived multiple socioeconomic, psychological, institutional, and gender-related barriers as major constraints to political

participation. Students identified poverty, limited access to transportation, inadequate civic knowledge, corruption, exclusion, intimidation, political violence, and weak representation as critical factors undermining democratic engagement. The findings further showed that fear of rejection, insults, exploitation, and disregard for citizens' opinions negatively affect students' willingness to participate in political processes. Additionally, respondents acknowledged that gender inequalities, low educational attainment, and low self-confidence among women continue to hinder female political participation.

The study found no statistically significant difference in senior high school students' understanding of political participation across the various age categories within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The findings revealed that students, irrespective of age differences, demonstrated relatively similar levels of political awareness, democratic understanding, and perceptions regarding political participation. The results further suggest that shared educational experiences and similar civic exposure among students may have contributed to the uniformity in political understanding across the age groups.

The study found no statistically significant difference in senior high school students' understanding of political participation across the various educational levels (SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3) within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The findings revealed that students across all forms demonstrated relatively similar levels of political awareness, democratic understanding, and perceptions regarding political participation. The results further suggest that students within the senior high school environment are exposed to comparable civic education experiences, democratic discussions, and sociopolitical information irrespective of their level of academic progression.

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the growing body of literature on youth political participation, civic engagement, and democratic socialization within developing democratic contexts. The study advances empirical understanding by demonstrating that students' understanding of political participation is influenced less by demographic variables such as age and educational level and more by shared civic experiences, institutional exposure, and sociopolitical environments. These findings challenge traditional assumptions within political participation literature that educational progression and age automatically translate into higher political awareness and democratic engagement.

From a research perspective, the study highlights the need for future investigations to examine broader contextual determinants of political participation among young people, including family political socialization, media influence, digital political engagement, peer networks, socioeconomic background, and institutional trust. The findings also suggest the importance of comparative and longitudinal studies capable of examining how civic attitudes and democratic participation evolve over time across different educational and sociocultural contexts.

In terms of practice, the study provides important implications for educational policymakers, curriculum developers, and democratic governance institutions. The findings underscore the need to strengthen civic and democratic education within senior high schools through participatory learning approaches, student leadership programmes, civic clubs, debates, mock parliamentary activities, and inclusive decision-making structures. Educational institutions should move beyond theoretical civic instruction by promoting experiential democratic practices that enhance students' political efficacy, critical thinking, and active citizenship.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the necessity for governments, electoral bodies, and civic organizations to address barriers such as political intimidation, exclusion, corruption, inequality, and misinformation that undermine youth participation in democratic processes. Strengthening inclusive civic engagement strategies may therefore contribute to the development of politically conscious, democratically responsible, and socially active young citizens capable of sustaining democratic governance and national development.

Conclusions

The study concludes that political participation among senior high school students within the Cape Coast Metropolis is constrained by interconnected structural, socioeconomic, psychological, and institutional challenges. Although students demonstrated considerable awareness of democratic participation and governance processes, persistent barriers such as corruption, political exclusion, intimidation, inadequate civic support, and unequal participation opportunities continue to weaken meaningful youth engagement in democratic activities. The findings further suggest that democratic participation among students extends beyond formal political structures and is strongly influenced by broader social conditions, institutional responsiveness, and perceptions of political fairness and inclusion.

The study concludes that age does not significantly influence senior high school students' understanding of political participation within the Cape Coast Metropolis. Contrary to traditional assumptions that political maturity and civic understanding increase substantially with age, the findings indicate that students within the senior high school environment possess relatively comparable levels of political awareness and democratic orientation. The study further concludes that educational exposure, civic socialization, and institutional learning experiences may exert greater influence on students' political understanding than age differences alone.

The study concludes that students' educational level does not significantly influence their understanding of political participation within the Cape Coast Metropolis. Contrary to conventional assumptions that higher educational progression necessarily enhances political awareness and democratic engagement, the findings indicate that students across SHS 1, SHS 2, and SHS 3 possess relatively comparable levels of political understanding. The study further concludes that shared institutional experiences, civic socialization, and access to similar educational content may play a greater role in shaping students' political awareness than differences in class level alone.

Recommendations

Educational institutions, policymakers, and democratic governance stakeholders should strengthen civic and democratic education programmes aimed at enhancing students' political efficacy, civic competence, and practical understanding of democratic participation. Schools should create inclusive participatory platforms that encourage students' involvement in decision-making processes, leadership activities, and civic engagements. Furthermore, government institutions and civic organizations should implement targeted interventions to reduce barriers such as political intimidation, exclusion, discrimination, and misinformation that discourage youth participation. Gender-responsive civic education initiatives should also be strengthened to promote equal participation opportunities for both male and female students. Finally, policymakers and democratic institutions should promote transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, and fair representation within participatory governance structures to enhance political trust, democratic legitimacy, and active citizenship among young people.

Educational institutions and policymakers should continue strengthening civic and democratic education programmes that promote inclusive political awareness and participation among students irrespective of age differences. Schools should also provide practical democratic experiences through student leadership activities, debates, civic clubs, and participatory decision-making processes to sustain students' political understanding and democratic engagement.

Furthermore, curriculum developers and civic education stakeholders should emphasize experiential civic learning approaches capable of enhancing students' political efficacy, critical thinking, and active citizenship across all age categories. Finally, future studies should examine additional contextual factors, including family background, political socialization, media exposure, and socioeconomic conditions, that may influence students' understanding of political participation beyond age differences alone.

Educational authorities, curriculum developers, and civic education stakeholders should continue strengthening democratic and civic education programmes across all senior high school levels to sustain students' political awareness and democratic engagement. Schools should also intensify participatory learning activities such as debates, student leadership programmes, civic clubs, mock parliamentary sessions, and democratic decision-making platforms to enhance practical civic experiences among students.

Furthermore, policymakers and educational institutions should ensure that civic education curricula remain relevant, inclusive, and responsive to contemporary democratic issues affecting young people. Future research should also examine additional contextual variables such as family political socialization, media exposure, socioeconomic background, and peer influence to provide broader explanations for students' understanding of political participation beyond educational level differences.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should extend the scope of investigation beyond senior high school students to include tertiary students, out-of-school youth, and other demographic groups to provide broader insights into political participation and democratic engagement among young people in Ghana and other developing democracies. Comparative studies across different regions, educational institutions, and sociocultural settings would also contribute to a deeper understanding of contextual variations in political participation.

Further research should examine additional determinants of political participation, including family political socialization, media exposure, digital activism, socioeconomic background, peer influence, religious orientation, and institutional trust. Given the growing influence of technology and social media on democratic engagement, future studies should particularly explore the impact of digital platforms and online political participation on youth civic consciousness and political behaviour.

Longitudinal research designs are also recommended to assess how students' political attitudes, democratic values, and participation behaviours evolve over time. Such studies may provide clearer insights into the relationship between civic education, political maturity, and sustained democratic engagement across different stages of development.

Moreover, future researchers should consider employing mixed methods approaches by integrating qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and observational techniques with quantitative surveys. This would allow for richer contextual understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, motivations, and challenges associated with political participation. Finally, future studies should investigate the effectiveness of civic education policies, democratic learning interventions, and participatory school governance structures in promoting active citizenship, political efficacy, and inclusive democratic participation among young people.

Author Contribution Statements

Ernest Ampomah Arkoh, Kankam Boadu, Gabriel Aboagye, Gloria Osei, and Ebenezer Darkwah Arkoh collectively contributed to the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings, drafting of the manuscript, and critical revision of the article for important intellectual content. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication and agreed to be fully accountable for all aspects of the work.

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