

## Perception of the Justice System and Undergraduates' Participation in the Democratic System

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**Abstract:** *This study examined undergraduates' perception of justice system and participation in democratic activities Southwest Nigeria. Descriptive research design of the survey type was used in this study. The population of this study consisted of 872,100 undergraduate students, universities in Southwest, Nigeria. The sample for this study consisted of 1522 university undergraduates selected using multistage sampling procedure that include simple random, stratified and purposive sampling techniques. 'Undergraduates Perception of Justice System and Democratic Activities Questionnaire' (UPJSDAQ) was used to collect data. Face and content validity of the instrument, were ensured by experts in the fields of Social Studies Education, and Tests and Measurement in the Faculty of education, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. Reliability of the instrument was ensured through test-retest method and a reliability coefficient of 0.88 was obtained. Data were analysed with descriptive and inferential statistics such as frequency counts, means, standard deviations, and percentages; and PPMC. It was reported that undergraduate have positive perception of justice system but their level of participation in democratic activities was low. A significant relationship between perception of justice system and participation in democratic activities. It was inferred that while undergraduates believe in the legitimacy and effectiveness of the justice system, this confidence has not sufficiently translated into active democratic participation, indicating the need for strategies that can convert institutional trust into practical democratic engagement among university students.*

**Keywords:** justice system, judiciary, democratic activities, democracy, civic activities, undergraduate students

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## INTRODUCTION

There is a need for the youths to be seriously involved in the entire democratic process for them to fulfil their expected and functional role as democratic citizens. The choice of the youths to either participate or otherwise in this matter is dependent on their awareness, adherence and internationalization of these democratic values and this has serious implications on democracy and the general polity.

Democratic values like respect for justice, equality and equity are of significant importance in civic engagement particularly with the youths. In the literal sense, Justice is the principle that underlies the fair, equitable and impartial treatment of individuals and groups in society. Justice is very vital to society which ensures equality and freedom without putting people on pedestals, according to Olatunji (2015). As the Olatunji pointed out, justice focuses on treating equals and un-equals equally, proportional to their differences. Through the experiences of the researcher, it was found that a lot of the undergraduates are not just and exploit their own peers in examination malpractice. Consequently, the development of justice is essential for social stability, the well-being of individuals and confidence in institutions, as it guarantees access to fundamental human rights, strengthens the functioning of society and helps to foster trust in the legal system.

Without promoting and entrenchment of justice at all levels, the attainment of national integration that could enable growth and desire development in Nigeria will become a mirage. Everyone will have to put on positive attitude toward justice in order to obtain the desired level of civic participation. This is because perception is like many other aspects of behaviour an abstraction, yet one that is real to the person who has it. Therefore, Olorunda (2019) posited that perception is important as these are the motivational conditions for civic engagement.

They are ethos which control the extent, level and involvement of participants in a democracy. Some of these values of Nigerian democracies are freedom, equality(one-man-one vote), justice, toleration of diversity, unity(national integration), national loyalty (as against sectional loyalty), rule of law, separation of powers, checks and balances, transparency, patriotism, dignity of human person, representative government, self-reliance, due process, electoral credibility(citizens vote must count), common good (acting in the best interest), popular consent, supremacy of the people, toleration of opposition and legitimacy (Nnamdi, 2009). They are in turn determined by the factors of or the interplay of political culture, civic or citizenship education and the political experiences of the society in question.

In the field of education, resources are continually allocated and teachers are a key mechanism of reward (and punishment) allocation, according to Resh and Sabbagh (2014). They assess students' performances and learning behaviour, categorise students into classrooms, tracks and ability groups and award grades and certificates. Teachers (and peers) also provide (or don't provide) praise, support, help, encouragement, respect and esteem, and students judge the "fairness" or "unfairness" of their rewards (or punishments) against their constructed sense of their deservedness.

Embedded in the ongoing educational process, these evaluations become an integral component of students' educational experience. The scholars mentioned types of justice, which are distributive justice (grades), relational justice (teacher–student relations), and procedural justice (means of

distributing the rewards). A sense of distributive and procedural justice in schools is likely to influence democratic liberal orientations. Empirically oriented studies have not yet addressed the relationship, although related studies have revealed that unequal distribution of school “rewards” (in the sense of both distributive and procedural justice) can lead to delegitimization of the teachers and of the school system as a whole, as well as of formal authorities in the broader society.

Justice in the words of Igbineweka, Iguodala and Anukaenyi (2016) could be conceptualized as fair and just relation between the individual and society. It is determined by the fairness in generating opportunities for wealth. Social justice in western cultures and in ancient Asian cultures is the process of making sure people perform their duties in society, and receive their rights (Chianu, 2001). Social justice ensures that the rights and duties are safeguarded in society and hence encourages people to be patriotic.

Social justice became more popular in the field of law during the early 20th century and was integrated into international laws and institutions. For instance, the preamble to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2020) said that “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice”. The necessity of social justice therefore in managing students’ disciplinary behaviours in the universities cannot be over emphasized. Personal observation and interaction with some of the students in the university, however, reveal that administration of justice in instances of violations done by students is poor. There are a number of concerns that students have about the fairness of administering justice in situations with students.

In a cross-nation study, Scheffer, Lasater international comparison basis. The researcher contrasted the attitudes of student's nurse towards social justice in United Kingdom and United States. The study design was cross sectional, with two Universities, one in the UK (urban) and one in the USA (Urban and Rural campuses). 230 students’ nurses from UK and US participated in the study. The results showed that the student nurses in the general opinion were in agreement with the statements that promote social justice. The US students were found to be significantly more likely to have positive attitude towards social justice with promotion of activism and level of education. This study undoubtedly provided empirical values explaining attitudes towards justice, nevertheless, only student nurses participated in the study and findings from it could not be generalized, Scheffer, Lasater, Atherton and Kyle (2019) investigated student nurses’ attitudes to social justice and poverty on to students in other disciplines.

In an exploratory study, Shahbazov (2019) looked into the attitudes of university students and criminal justice professionals towards electronic monitoring in Azerbaijan using a focus group study. Thirty-five persons were involved in the explorative study. As far as the deterrent effect of electronic monitoring in the country is concerned, the participants were very concerned, while they were optimistic about the capacity of electronic monitoring to rehabilitate. This study failed to show how the participant’s attitude exert influence on civic engagement. More so, the explorative methods adopted lacks empirical evidence to explain the possible interaction of attitude with civic engagement. Dozier (2009) conducted an investigation that was related to justice. The researcher examined the factors that affect college students' attitudes towards rehabilitation or punishment of criminal offenders in the United States. The study involved the sense of justice in criminal cases of robbery, rape, molestation, burglary, drug sale and drug possession. The research method used was Survey Analysis

and the measurement of attitude was done on the continuum of punishment-rehabilitation. A total of 1427 randomly selected Texas State University undergraduates and graduate students participated in the study. The study findings indicated that there was a difference in students' attitude on the issue of justice to criminals. This study is a one-way study because the influences which student's attitude can be given to their civil engagement were not caught. It did not indicate either what the sense of justice could cause them to do, nor what it could prevent them from doing. This gap could be bridged in this study particularly where Dozier research was done outside Nigeria.

The effects of students' sense of distributive and school (procedural) justice on democratic-related attitudes such as liberal democratic orientation (civil rights), social trust and institutional trust was investigated by Resh and Sabbagh (2014). This study is based on a national sample of 48 Junior High Schools, with a total of 5000 grade 8-9 students in the 2010-2011 school year. The data obtained for the study were analyzed by the Hierarchical Linear Model (HLM7) programme. Results of the study illustrated that sense of distributive justice and particularly sense of relational justice contribute to positive outcomes in liberal democratic orientation and trust in people and in formal institutions. It was also reported that school (aggregate) sense of procedural justice compounds the positive effects and in the case of democratic orientation, interacts with instrumental justice to amplify its impact on this effect.

Igbinneweka, Iguodala and Anukaenyi (2016) carried out an inquiry of social justice in Nigeria. The researchers concentrated on infractions of undergraduate students and administration of social justice in Nigeria Universities. Survey research design was selected in order to observe and describe the situation of students infractions and the ability of the University authorities to fairly administer the justice. Questionnaire as the major instrument of data collection was used in collecting data from the students and members of student disciplinary committee as respondents of the study were 454 students and 146 members of student disciplinary committee respectively. Percentages, mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the data. The findings of the study clearly showed that students were concerned about the administration of social justice when there is an infraction in the form of stealing, fighting, involved in examination malpractices, battery, intimidation, bullying and cybercrime among others. The study, however, did not give an explanation on how the students' concern is related to their involvement in civic activities.

Abdullahi (2021) in another study examined social justice issues in educational and management of student development in Kwara State, Nigeria. Descriptive research with quantitative approach was taken to test the hypotheses in order to identify the relationship between social justice issues and students' development that will be translated to students' engagement in civic activities. A total of 175 principals and 364 teachers participated in the study and data were collected from them with closed-ended questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistical tools were used to analyze the data. Findings from the study revealed that when students are given equal opportunity to learn, they will invariably be furnished with the needed skills to enhance their development and by extension ability to engage in civic activities. It was also reported that social justice through provision of needs, students learn and appreciate the value of being citizens that will be involved in civic activities without fear and favour. This study is limited by its scope as it was carried out in Kwara state only and the level of education in this study makes it impossible to generalize the findings to university undergraduates.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Though youths are acknowledged as the ones who will sustain democratic governance, there is a growing concern on the level of involvement of the undergraduates in democratic governance in Nigeria. Internalizing democratic values, including respect for the rule of law, equality, fairness and justice, is a central aspect of citizens' active engagement in democracy. Yet, from what is observed in the University setting, it could be seen that many of these learners in the University context exhibit behaviors and attitudes that are in contrast to these values such as examination malpractice, exploitation of fellow students and low level of trust in the institutional processes. These realities prompt reflection on the possibility that students' sense of justice, especially in relation to the educational and legal institutions, might be affecting their engagement in democratic processes.

In addition, the judicial system in universities and in the justice system seems to elicit mixed feelings among students. There are many reports and observations that many undergraduate students feel that disciplinary measures and institutional decisions are not handed out fairly and consistently, undermining trust in formal authorities. Perceptions of fairness and justice are a motivational foundation for behaviour – negative perceptions of fairness and justice can manifest in apathy, distrust, and lack of civic and democratic engagement. Students may develop negative attitudes towards governance structures, and thus jeopardize democratic participation and national integration when they feel that systems in which they live and experience their everyday life are unfair.

While there have been several studies of attitudes towards social justice, disciplinary processes and democratic orientations among learners, many of these studies were conducted outside Nigeria, limited to certain professional groups and did not provide a direct link between perception of justice and civic/democratic participation. The studies that have already been done in Nigeria have focussed on social justice administration and student development rather than providing a satisfactory explanation of the effect of undergraduates' perception of the justice system on their involvement in democratic processes. Thus, it is still evident that there is a gap in empirical research about the relationship between perception of the justice system and the democratic participation of undergraduates. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by studying the influence of students' perception of justice in their participation in the democratic system.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to investigate undergraduate perception of the justice system and their level of participation in the democratic activities. Specifically, the study will investigate:

1. the perception of justice system by university undergraduates,
2. level of participation in the democratic activities
3. relationship between undergraduate perception of the justice system and their level of participation in the democratic activities.

### **Research questions**

1. How do university undergraduates perceive the justice system in Nigeria?
2. What is the level of undergraduate participation in democratic activities in south west Nigeria?

### **Research Hypothesis**

1. There is no significant relationship between perception of the justice system and undergraduate participation in democratic activities.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The descriptive research design of the survey type was used in this study. This involved description of the existing situation as regards undergraduates' perception of justice system and participation in political activities in Southwest, Nigeria. The population of this study consisted of 872,100 male and female undergraduates from 17 public and 27 private universities in Southwest, Nigeria (NUC, 2025). The sample for this study consisted of 1522 university undergraduates who were selected using multistage sampling procedure. In the first stage, three out of the six states that make up Southwest, Nigeria were selected using simple random sampling technique. The second stage involved the use of stratified sampling technique to select two universities (one federal and one state). The stratification was based on the ownership of the universities. The third stage involved the selection of 260 undergraduates in each of the selected universities using simple sampling technique.

For this investigation, the researcher designed one instrument titled 'Undergraduates Perception of Justice System and Democratic Activities Questionnaire' (UPJSDAQ) to collect relevant data. To ascertain the face and content validity of the instrument, copies of the instrument were subjected to thorough scrutiny by experts in the fields of Social Studies Education, and Tests and Measurement in the Faculty of education, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. Reliability of the UPJSDAQ was established using a test-retest method. The copies of the instrument were administered on 30 respondents who were not part of the sample but within the population. At the interval of two weeks, the copies of the instrument were re-administered on the same set of people. The data obtained from the two trial tests were subjected to Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and a reliability coefficient of 0.88 was obtained. Thus, the instrument was adjudged reliable. The instrument was administered by the researcher with the help of a trained research assistant in each of the selected universities. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, means, standard deviations and percentages were used to answer the research questions. Inferential statistics such as Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC)

### **RESULTS**

Research Question 1. How do university undergraduates perceive the justice system in Nigeria?

To determine how university undergraduates perceive the justice system in Nigeria (Positive or Negative) scores of items 1-5 in section B of UPJSDAQ were subjected to frequency count, percentage and mean rating. The negative attitude was determined by scores below the mean cut off point ( $x < 2.50$ , i.e  $x = 1.00-2.49$ ) while the positive was determined by the mean cut off and above ( $x > 2.50$ , i.e  $x = 2.50-4.00$ ). The result is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Frequency counts and Mean rating of how university undergraduates perceive the justice system in Nigeria

| <i>Item</i>   | <i>SA</i>  |             | <i>A</i>   |             | <i>D</i>   |            | <i>SD</i> |            | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Remark</i>          |
|---|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|-------------|------------------------|
|   | <i>f</i>   | <i>%</i>    | <i>f</i>   | <i>%</i>    | <i>f</i>   | <i>%</i>   | <i>f</i>  | <i>%</i>   |             |                        |
| I do not like jungle justice  | 858        | 55.4        | 273        | 17.6        | 186        | 12.0       | 231       | 14.9       | 3.14        | <i>Positive</i>        |
| Court is the best place to seek redress for injustice                   | 879        | 57.9        | 567        | 36.6        | 57         | 3.7        | 27        | 1.7        | 3.51        | <i>Positive</i>        |
| Both parties should be heard before passing judgment                    | 1056       | 68.2        | 432        | 27.9        | 15         | 1.0        | 45        | 2.9        | 3.61        | <i>Positive</i>        |
| Crimes of any type should be reported to the law enforcement agencies   | 735        | 47.5        | 492        | 31.8        | 297        | 19.2       | 24        | 1.6        | 3.25        | <i>Positive</i>        |
| I believe suspects should not be kept in police custody for a long time | 804        | 51.9        | 486        | 31.4        | 192        | 12.4       | 66        | 4.3        | 3.31        | <i>Positive</i>        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>  | <b>866</b> | <b>56.2</b> | <b>450</b> | <b>29.0</b> | <b>149</b> | <b>9.7</b> | <b>79</b> | <b>5.1</b> | <b>3.41</b> | <b><i>Positive</i></b> |

The information contained in Table 1 above showed the perception of undergraduates’ students on judicial system in Southwest, Nigeria. Considering the mean cut off point of 2.50, university undergraduates had positive perception towards the five items in table 1 above. Considering the grand mean of 3.41 that fall within the mean cut off point of 2.50-4.00, the overall perception of undergraduates’ students of justice system in Southwest, Nigeria was considered positive.

Research Question 2. What is the level of undergraduate participation in democratic activities in south west Nigeria?

To determine the level of undergraduates’ participation in democratic activities in southwest, Nigerian Nigeria? scores of items 6-10 of section C of UPJSDAQ was subjected to frequency count, percentage and mean rating. The low level was determined by scores below the mean cut off point (2.50 i.e  $x = 1.00-2.49$ ) while the moderate level was determined by the mean cut off point ( $x = 2.50-2.99$ ). The high level was determined by the score above the mean cut off point ( $x > 2.50$ , i.e  $x = 3.00-4.00$ ). The result is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Frequency counts and Mean rating of the level of participation in democratic activities among university undergraduates in southwest, Nigeria

| <i>Items</i>                                      | <i>A</i>   |             | <i>S</i>   |             | <i>R</i>   |             | <i>N</i>   |             | <i>Mean</i> | <i>Remark</i>     |
|---|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
|   | <i>f</i>   | <i>%</i>    | <i>f</i>   | <i>%</i>    | <i>f</i>   | <i>%</i>    | <i>f</i>   | <i>%</i>    |             |                   |
| Register to vote during election                  | 438        | 29.1        | 603        | 40.0        | 366        | 24.3        | 99         | 6.6         | 2.92        | <i>Moderate</i>   |
| Vote during national election                     | 294        | 19.0        | 528        | 34.2        | 654        | 42.3        | 69         | 4.5         | 2.68        | <i>Moderate</i>   |
| Vote during local election                        | 315        | 20.4        | 228        | 14.8        | 672        | 43.5        | 330        | 21.4        | 2.34        | <i>Low</i>        |
| Campaign for candidate during election            | 270        | 17.5        | 168        | 10.9        | 780        | 50.5        | 327        | 21.2        | 2.25        | <i>Low</i>        |
| Wear my party souvenir                            | 132        | 8.5         | 306        | 19.8        | 549        | 35.5        | 558        | 36.1        | 2.10        | <i>Low</i>        |
| Donate money to support candidate during election | 162        | 10.5        | 267        | 17.3        | 492        | 31.8        | 624        | 40.4        | 1.98        | <i>Low</i>        |
| <b>Grand Total</b>                                | <b>269</b> | <b>17.5</b> | <b>350</b> | <b>22.8</b> | <b>586</b> | <b>38.0</b> | <b>335</b> | <b>21.7</b> | <b>2.38</b> | <b><i>Low</i></b> |

The information contained in Table 2 showed the level of participation in democratic activities among university undergraduates in Southwest, Nigeria. Considering the mean cut off point of 2.50, the level

of participation in democratic activities among university undergraduates in southwest, Nigeria was considered moderate in two out of the 6 items in table 2 above. Participation in democratic activities among university undergraduates was considered low in 4 out of the 6 items. Considering the grand mean of 2.38 that fall within the mean cut off point of 1.00-2.49, the overall level of participation in democratic activities among university undergraduates in southwest, Nigeria was considered low.

Research Hypothesis 1. There is no significant relationship between perception of the justice system and undergraduate participation in democratic activities.

To test this hypothesis, scores on perception of accountability and transparency and civic engagement among the university undergraduates were collated and subjected to Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The result is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:** PPMC showing relationship between perception of the justice system and undergraduate participation in democratic activities

| Variables                             | N    | Mean  | Std. Dev. | $r_{cal}$ | p-value |
|---------------------------------------|------|-------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Perception of justice system          | 1548 | 16.82 | 2.294     | 0.161*    | 0.000   |
| Participation in political Activities | 1548 | 14.27 | 1.051     |           |         |

*P < 0.05 (Significant Result)*

The information contained in Table 3 shows that  $r_{cal} = 0.161$ ;  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ . Since the p value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between perception of justice system and participation in political activities.

## DISCUSSION

The finding revealed that student's attitude of the undergraduates in Southwest, Nigeria towards the justice system was positive. This implies that majority of the respondents do not like jungle justice, believe in the court's ability to redress injustice, both parties should be heard before passing judgment, crime of any nature should be reported to the law enforcement agent, and that suspect should be kept in police custody for a long time without trial. This finding is contrary to the findings of by Igbinnweka, Iguodala and Anukaenyi (2016) who reported that students were worried about the administration of social justice in the event of stealing, fighting, examination malpractices, battery, intimidation, bullying and cybercrime among others.

University undergraduate students in the Southwest, Nigeria, were not very engaged in democratic activities. This implies that majority of the respondents do not vote during local election, failed to campaign for candidate during election, wear party souvenir and would not donate money to support candidate during election. This result confirmed the worry of Adeniji and Odeyemi (2023) on the high level of political apathy and youths' negative attitudes towards democracy in many democracies.

The study also found that there was a significant correlation between perception of justice system and democratic activities. This implies that undergraduates' engagement in democratic activities is could be associated with perception of justice, seeking redress in courts, fair hearing, reporting crime to enforcement agencies and timely dispensation of justice. This may be due to the fact that the

undergraduates think that the justice system is enough to guard them from arbitrary treatment while performing civic responsibilities. This finding is similar to the one made by Scheffer, Lasater, Atherton and Kyle (2019) which concluded that the promotion of activism and level of education significantly increased the likelihood of US students having positive attitude towards social justice. It also agrees with Resh and Sabbagh (2014) finding that sense of distributive justice and especially that of relational justice adds to the positive effects on liberal democratic orientation and on trust in people and in formal institutions. The result here equally agrees with Abdullahi (2021) exposition that when students are given equal opportunity to learn, they will invariably be furnished with the needed skills to enhance their development and by extension ability to engage in civic activities.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study revealed that University undergraduate students in Southwest Nigeria generally have positive views on justice system as they trust the institutions of justice; believe in the need to have a fair hearing and they reject the use of jungle justice for addressing crime; and believe that crime should be addressed through the appropriate law enforcement structure. However, their level of involvement in democratic activities is low, with many students demonstrating low levels of involvement in voting, political campaigning or other civic activity. Thus, although students in their university years trust and validate the justice system, this has not been enough to foster their democratic involvement, meaning that strategies should be developed that can transform the institutional trust into real democratic participation of university students.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following were recommended:

1. In the universities, the education of civic and political should be strengthened to help the undergraduate students participate actively in the democratic activities. Practical civic engagement programmes, voter education and courses in democratic responsibility should be integrated into the general studies programme in institutions so as to enable them to turn their positive perception of the justice system into active political participation.
2. Government and electoral authorities should step up the mobilization of youth, particularly students at universities, to vote. Campaigns to eliminate apathy towards voting and political participation can be carried out through awareness programmes, sensitisation exercises on campus and simplified voter registration process particularly during local and national elections.
3. There is a need to encourage students to engage in formal democratic processes including governance structures, debates, and policy dialogue forums at the university level, to help foster confidence and interest in democratic processes.
4. The justice system and law enforcement agencies should maintain and enhance the quality of justice and speedy justice, since students' involvement in democratic activities is related to their perception of justice and trust in institutions. Frequent changes that increase public confidence should foster participation in the public life.
5. Civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) need to work with universities to set up workshops, seminars and advocacy programmes which focus on peaceful political participation, rule of law and responsible citizenship of undergraduates.

6. Political parties need to create strategies to include youth in the process responsibly, and motivate them to get involved meaningfully in democratic processes through issue-based campaigns instead of providing material incentives for students.

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