



## The Role of Student Politics in Public Universities: A Study of Delhi University Elections

**Ananya Mishra**

B.A.(Hons) with Research in Political Science  
Hindu College, University of Delhi

### **Abstract:**

The study aims to identify how student politics function within the realm of a public university along with the set of challenges it poses to the idea of free and fair democratic elections. It observes that student elections are guided by ideology, normative values, institutional capacity, and party dynamics.

Taking Delhi University Students' Elections as a case study, the paper argues that it acts as a microcosm of Indian politics and its electioneering processes. Despite regulatory frameworks such as the Lyngdoh Committee and National Green Tribunal guidelines, these are frequently violated in practice.

The study further examines changes in student politics in the post-Mandal and post-liberalisation era, highlighting how caste, class, gender, and ethnicity influence electoral dynamics from ticket distribution to voting patterns thus challenging the ideal of a level playing field. With the rise of digital technology, campaigning and political awareness have transformed significantly, increasing participation and information dissemination.

Overall, the paper evaluates the effectiveness of student elections and argues for urgent reforms to ensure greater democratic participation and egalitarianism.

**Keywords:** University Elections, Student Politics, Indian politics.

### **Introduction**

Student politics has historically functioned as an important site of democratic engagement, political training, and ideological contestation. Universities, far from being isolated academic spaces, act as arenas where political consciousness is shaped, debated, and institutionalised. As Seymour Martin Lipset (1964) argued, institutions of higher education serve as key agents of political socialisation, producing individuals who are not merely educated but politically aware participants in democratic life. In the Indian context, student politics has played a critical role in



both nationalist and post-independence movements, making it central to understanding broader democratic processes.

This paper examines the functioning of student politics within public universities through a focused study of Delhi University Students' Union (DUSU) elections. It argues that student politics in Delhi University operates as a microcosm of Indian national politics, reflecting the same structural inequalities, identity-based mobilisations, and institutional contradictions. While student elections ostensibly provide a platform for democratic participation, they are simultaneously shaped by caste hierarchies, class disparities, gendered exclusions, and the growing influence of money and organisational power.

Drawing on both primary and secondary data, the study seeks to evaluate whether student politics fulfils its normative democratic role or merely reproduces existing socio-political inequalities within a smaller institutional framework.

### **Aims and objectives**

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the nature, functioning, and effectiveness of student politics within public universities, with a specific focus on Delhi University Student Union (DUSU) elections. It seeks to analyse whether student politics operates as a democratic space for participation and representation or as a microcosm of broader Indian political structures shaped by power, identity, and institutional constraints.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To analyse the conceptual and historical evolution of student politics in India

The study aims to trace the development of student politics from its origins in anti-colonial movements to its contemporary form, examining how structural and ideological shifts particularly post-Mandalisation and liberalisation have influenced its trajectory.

2. To examine the patterns of participation in Delhi University student elections

It seeks to evaluate the level, nature, and forms of student engagement, including voting behaviour, campaigning, and leadership involvement, in order to assess the depth of democratic participation.

3. To investigate the role of socio-economic factors such as caste, class, and gender

The objective is to understand how intersectional identities shape access, representation, and power dynamics within student politics, and whether these factors reproduce broader societal inequalities.

4. To evaluate the institutional and regulatory framework governing student elections

This includes analysing the effectiveness of guidelines (such as the Lyngdoh Committee recommendations) in ensuring free, fair, and transparent elections within the university.

5. To assess the impact of money, muscle power, and organisational backing

The study aims to explore how financial resources, political affiliations, and external influence affect electoral outcomes and limit opportunities for independent or marginalised candidates.

6. To analyse the role of digital media and new communication technologies



It examines how social media and digital platforms have transformed political mobilisation, campaigning strategies, and information dissemination among students.

### **Review of the related literature**

The study of student politics is rooted in the understanding that political behaviour is inseparable from social life. Drawing from classical thought and political sociology, universities are conceptualised not merely as academic spaces but as arenas of political socialisation, where democratic values are practised and contested (Lipset, 1964). Student communities, shaped by their socio-economic backgrounds, bring pre-existing identities into campus politics, making it an extension of broader societal structures.

Altbach (1968) situates student politics within the structural tensions between institutional authority and student aspirations, particularly in developing societies marked by inequality and restricted access to education. He argues that student movements emerge as responses to these structural constraints, often articulating demands for inclusion and representation. In the Indian context, Rudolph and Rudolph (1971) provide a contrasting perspective by arguing that student politics operates largely within formal institutional frameworks, functioning as a preparatory ground for mainstream political participation rather than an outright anti-establishment force.

The mediating role of student politics has been emphasised by Weinberg and Walker, and further elaborated in Indian scholarship. Oommen (1972) conceptualises student organisations as structured political entities that bridge the gap between civil society and the state, while Chopra (1978) highlights that student movements are deeply embedded in existing hierarchies of caste, class, and region. These studies collectively establish that campus politics reflects the sociological realities of society rather than operating as an isolated domain.

Subsequent scholarship has focused on the transformation of student politics in the post-independence and post-liberalisation period. Shah (2004) situates student movements within the broader framework of social movements in India, emphasising their role in articulating collective demands and mobilising marginalised groups. Similarly, Deshpande (2013) analyses how structural inequalities—particularly caste and class—continue to shape access to opportunities, including leadership positions within student politics. The rise of identity-based mobilisation, especially after the Mandal Commission, has further intensified these dynamics by foregrounding caste as a central axis of political participation.

Scholars such as Guru (2019) and Rege (2013) extend this analysis by foregrounding caste and gender as critical frameworks for understanding exclusion within political spaces. Guru emphasises the persistence of caste hierarchies in shaping everyday interactions and access to power, while Rege critiques the patriarchal and Brahmanical structures that marginalise women and lower-caste groups. These perspectives highlight that formal political inclusion does not necessarily translate into substantive equality, particularly within student politics.

Chatterjee (2004) introduces the idea of the “politics of the governed,” arguing that political participation in developing societies often operates through informal networks, negotiations, and



material incentives rather than purely ideological engagement. This framework is particularly relevant in understanding the role of money, patronage, and organisational backing in student elections.

In recent years, the role of digital technology has significantly reshaped political mobilisation. Castells (2012) highlights how networked communication enables new forms of collective action, decentralising political participation while also creating new inequalities in access and influence. This shift has transformed student politics into a hybrid domain, combining traditional organisational structures with digital campaigning and online mobilisation.

Overall, the literature establishes that student politics functions as a microcosm of national politics, shaped by intersecting dynamics of caste, class, gender, and institutional power. However, existing studies often remain historically grounded and insufficiently engage with contemporary transformations such as digitalisation and the intensification of identity politics, thereby leaving significant scope for further research.

### **Methodology**

The study adopts a qualitative-dominant research design supplemented by limited quantitative inputs. Primary data was collected through a structured survey administered via Google Forms, gathering responses from approximately 200 students across North, South, and Off campuses of Delhi University. The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions addressing political participation, voting behaviour, perceptions of representation, and the influence of socio-economic factors. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten individuals who had directly participated in student elections, providing insights into campaign practices, organisational structures, and lived experiences of political engagement.

The sampling method was purposive and stratified, ensuring representation of students with varying degrees of political awareness and participation. This approach aligns with Altbach's (1968) emphasis on understanding student politics through experiential and structural dimensions.

Secondary sources form a crucial component of the analysis, including works by Lipset (1964), Rudolph and Rudolph (1971), Chopra (1978), and Oommen (1972), which provide theoretical grounding. Contemporary developments are contextualised using contributions from Thapar (2016), Shah (2004), and Deshpande (2013), alongside media reports documenting recent electoral trends and institutional challenges.

The triangulation of survey data, interviews, and existing literature enhances the reliability and interpretive depth of the study, while also situating Delhi University within the broader trajectory of student politics in India.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings reveal that student politics in Delhi University is deeply embedded within the socio-political structures of Indian society. Rather than functioning as an autonomous democratic sphere, it reflects and reproduces inequalities associated with caste, class, and gender.



## **1. Caste and Identity-Based Mobilisation**

Caste emerges as a dominant factor influencing electoral behaviour and political participation. Survey findings indicate that nearly 70 percent of respondents perceive voting patterns to be significantly shaped by caste identity. This aligns with the broader sociological understanding that caste continues to structure access to power and representation in India (Guru, 2019).

The prominence of dominant caste groups in leadership positions, particularly in DUSU elections, mirrors national political trends. The recurrent dominance of specific regional caste groups demonstrates how social capital, kinship networks, and demographic concentration translate into electoral advantage (Deshpande, 2013). As Chopra (1978) observed, student politics cannot be separated from the societal matrix within which it operates; instead, it becomes a reflection of existing hierarchies.

At the same time, caste-based mobilisation is not entirely regressive. For marginalised groups, it provides a mechanism for collective assertion and political visibility. However, the study finds that such mobilisation often remains exclusionary rather than transformative, reinforcing identity boundaries rather than dismantling them.

## **2. Class Inequality and the Role of Money Power**

Economic capital significantly shapes the nature of electoral competition in Delhi University. Campaigning requires substantial financial resources, ranging from organising rallies to mobilising supporters and distributing incentives. Despite the expenditure limits prescribed by the Lyngdoh Committee, these regulations are widely flouted in practice.

The influence of money power creates structural barriers for candidates from economically weaker backgrounds, effectively limiting democratic participation. As Partha Chatterjee (2004) argues, political mobilisation often depends on access to resources, and this dynamic is clearly visible within student elections.

Survey responses further reveal a divided perception among students: while approximately 40 percent believe that elections promote democratic values, an equal proportion view them as ineffective in achieving meaningful representation. This ambivalence reflects a broader disillusionment with electoral processes perceived as dominated by wealth and organisational backing.

The role of political parties and external funding networks further intensifies this imbalance. Candidates affiliated with larger organisations benefit from logistical support, visibility, and strategic coordination, making it difficult for independent or less-resourced candidates to compete effectively.

## **3. Gendered Exclusion and Structural Barriers**

Gender remains one of the most significant axes of exclusion within student politics. Despite formal equality in electoral rights, women's participation is limited by structural, cultural, and institutional constraints. Representation within DUSU remains minimal, often restricted to tokenistic inclusion rather than substantive participation.



The exclusion of several women's colleges from the central electoral process further compounds this issue, raising concerns about the denial of democratic rights. Feminist scholars have long argued that political spaces are structured by patriarchal norms that restrict women's access and agency (Rege, 2013), and the findings of this study reinforce this perspective.

Safety concerns also play a crucial role in limiting participation. Reports of harassment, intimidation, and violence during election periods create an environment that discourages women from engaging in political activities. The unequal freedom to access public spaces, campaign extensively, and build networks places women candidates at a distinct disadvantage compared to their male counterparts.

#### **4. Institutional Limitations and Regulatory Failure**

The institutional framework governing student elections, particularly the Lyngdoh Committee guidelines, was designed to ensure fairness and transparency. However, the study finds a significant gap between formal regulations and their implementation.

Violations such as excessive expenditure, defacement of public property, and instances of violence remain common. This reflects what Max Weber (1947) described as the limitations of bureaucratic rationality, where formal rules exist but fail to achieve their intended outcomes due to weak enforcement mechanisms.

Judicial interventions and administrative measures have attempted to address these issues, yet their impact remains limited. The persistence of irregularities suggests that institutional reforms alone are insufficient without broader structural changes in political culture and accountability mechanisms.

The emergence of digital media has transformed the landscape of student politics. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter have become central to campaigning, mobilisation, and information dissemination. This shift aligns with Castells' (2012) concept of networked politics, where digital communication facilitates new forms of participation and collective action. The study observes an increase in student engagement through online platforms, particularly among first-time voters and politically unaligned individuals.

However, digitalisation also introduces new challenges, including the spread of misinformation, polarisation, and the prioritisation of image-based campaigning over substantive debate. The growing reliance on digital strategies risks reducing political engagement to symbolic gestures rather than meaningful deliberation.

#### **Conclusion**

The analysis demonstrates that student politics in Delhi University occupies a paradoxical position. On one hand, it provides an important platform for political socialisation, leadership development, and democratic participation. On the other, it reproduces the very inequalities and power structures that it is expected to challenge.

The functioning of DUSU elections as a microcosm of Indian politics is evident in the dominance of caste-based mobilisation, the influence of money and organisational power, and the persistence



of gendered exclusion. Institutional mechanisms designed to regulate elections have proven inadequate, highlighting the need for more effective enforcement and structural reforms. At the same time, the evolving role of digital media presents both opportunities and challenges, reshaping the ways in which students engage with politics. While it has expanded access and participation, it has also altered the nature of political discourse in ways that may undermine its democratic potential.

For student politics to fulfil its normative role, it must move beyond symbolic participation towards substantive inclusivity and accountability. This requires not only institutional reform but also a broader transformation in political culture, ensuring that universities remain spaces of critical engagement rather than mere reflections of existing power hierarchies.

### **References**

- Altbach, P. (1968). *Student Politics in Developing Nations*.
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*.
- Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The Politics of the Governed*.
- Chopra, S. (1978). *Student Movements in India*.
- Deshpande, S. (2013). *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*.
- Guru, G. (2019). *Caste and Social Justice*.
- Lipset, S. M. (1964). *Student Politics*.
- Oommen, T. K. (1972). *Student Movements and Politics*.
- Rege, S. (2013). *Against the Madness of Manu*.
- Rudolph, L. I., & Rudolph, S. H. (1971). *Education and Politics in India*.
- Shah, G. (2004). *Social Movements in India*.
- Thapar, R. (2016). *The Past as Present*.
- Weber, M. (1947). *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*.
- Weinberg, I., & Walker, K. (1969). *Student Politics and Society*.

### **Cite this Article:**

**Mishra Ananya, "The Role of Student Politics in Public Universities: A Study of Delhi University Elections"** The Research Dialogue, Open Access Peer-reviewed & Refereed Journal, Pp-113–119, Volume-05, Issue-01, April-2026, <https://theresearchdialogue.com/>



This is an Open access Journal / article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. All rights reserved.



# CERTIFICATE

## of Publication

*This Certificate is proudly presented to*

**Ananya Mishra**

**For publication of Research Paper title**

**The Role of Student Politics in Public Universities: A Study of Delhi University Elections**

Published in 'The Research Dialogue' Peer-Reviewed / Refereed Research Journal and E-ISSN: 2583-438X, Volume-05, Issue-01, Month April, Year-2026, Impact Factor (RPRI-4.73)

**Dr. Lohans Kumar Kalyani**  
Editor- In-chief



**Dr. Neeraj Yadav**  
Executive-In-Chief- Editor

**Note:** This E-Certificate is valid with published paper and the paper must be available online at: <https://theresearchdialogue.com/>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.64880/theresearchdialogue.v5i1.13>