

## RETHINKING MOROCCAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ENGAGEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*There is a strong belief that civic and political participation sustain democracy through civic and political involvement. (Sherrod, 2005; Sherrod and Baskir, 2007). This importance of civic engagement focuses on the need for innovative ways to prompt university students' in larger political involvement within their community. Another reason that accounts for this growing interest in active citizenship is due to the widespread concern about the decline in civic engagement and low participation by youth in the political process as well as reluctance of these young people evincing interest in their communities. (Thesis-More & Hibbing, 2005; Putnam, 2000; Fahmy, 2006). Based on the findings of a massive body of research, it is not surprising that the enhancement of active citizenship has become recurrent in the public and academic discourse. This goes to show that, in the last decade, citizenship education has been at the forefront of both educational research and curricula designs. The mission of universities should transcend technical formation to include what is referred to as the "third mission". The latter underlines engagement in non-academic activities that target preparing students for responsible leadership and citizenship roles. (Molas-Gallart et al. 2002). The objective of this paper is to explore Moroccan university students' different forms of engagement. In order to achieve this objective, a study was conducted using a quantitative research method. The sample involved 242 Undergraduate English students and four faculties form Moroccan University.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Active Citizenship, Civic Engagement, Community Engagement, Political Engagement, Third Mission*

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### INTRODUCTION

A massive amount of academic literature on citizenship/civic education is available, which is generally influenced by the conventional perception of citizenship Golubeva (2018). Much less research is done to understand citizenship from a broader perspective. In the traditional understanding, citizenship is regarded as a set of political rights and duties, with citizens belonging to or identifying with a specific nation or country. However, in today's globalized world, this understanding seems to be too narrow. Accordingly, it would be appropriate and efficient to develop an interdisciplinary approach to study the variables that influence citizens' attitudes with the aim of achieving social, political, and civic engagement. Golubeva et al (2018). Define active citizenship as "participation in civil society, community, and political life, characterized by mutual respect and non-violence and in accordance with human rights and democracy." This definition seems to be exhaustive in nature and includes such vital notions such as participatory activities, the attitude of mutual respect, peace, human rights and responsibilities, and democracy. Therefore, active citizenship education should be perceived as a lifelong learning process. (Bagnall, 2010).

Given this paramount importance of civic engagement, this paper attempts to find out on what extent our university students are politically and socially involved. The article also delved into the different types of engagement and tried to tackle the noticeable decline in civic participation among Moroccan students at the tertiary level, identify its causes, and suggest some recommendations to make such engagement vibrant. While higher education main activities and concerns have conventionally focused on research and innovation, and teaching and training, the third area of significant importance emerged, namely the role tertiary education institutions play in community development (Goddard 2007). To highlight this importance, the study sought to find out to what extent our universities play the role of making their students involved in their society. This paper used a quantitative method. The participants are students from the English student departments of four Moroccan faculties. The objective of the study was to explore the involvement of the participants in their community.

### **POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT VS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

When dealing with citizens' engagement in politics, political science research has traditionally place more emphasis on electoral participation Van Deth (2001). According to Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995), political engagement is defined as "activity that influences government action either directly by impacting the implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 38. In the same vein, voting is the most important activity within this domain. Accordingly, voting was perceived as the primary way for citizens to make their voices heard, and voting turnout has been regarded as the most largely adopted measure of citizen participation. Citizens vote in the general elections so as to back up some parties or candidates or to minimize others' chances of making much influence. This type of participation is referred to as formal or conventional political participation. However, this type may also include activities such as helping a candidate or working for a party, trying to persuade someone how to vote, or working (individually or collectively) to have an impact on public policies. Also, for "formal" collective forms of political behavior, the typical example would be membership: in a political party, or any organization with a distinct political agenda, e.g., human rights advocacy groups, peace organization, or environmental groups.

In contrast to political engagement, this is defined as an organized voluntary activity focused on problem-solving and helping others. It includes a broad range of work undertaken on individual basis or with others to effect change. Active participation in society apparently prompts citizens to be more knowledgeable and concerned with their community's issues and makes them more tolerant and more linked to their fellow citizens. Social engagement is of paramount importance, and if people are engaged in their communities, many of society's ills will disappear. Proponents of civic participation argue that it would result in reducing crime rates (McCarthy et al. 2002, Rosenfeld et al. 2001), more efficient and responsive democratic governments (Putnam et al. 1993, Ch. 4; Ray 2002), and an empowered and vibrant citizenry, including young people (Youniss et al. 2001). This type of engagement falls into two categories of participation. Firstly, there is a participation in voluntary associations. This engagement involves some kinds of voluntary activities in associations, namely participation in membership, donating money, and rendering voluntary work for associations of different concerns, such as consumer, cultural, environmental, humanitarian, and social issues. The second type is informal helping behavior; this type of engagement involves providing help for others and the frequency with which participants they undertake. It differs from the activity of welfare associations where it is more of being individual and personal, rather than organized and institutionalized by a charitable association.

The features of political engagement include the goals, the targets of activity, the institutions or venues in which it takes place, and the level of effort invested. As described earlier, political engagement is an activity that aims at influencing government policy or affecting the selection of public officials. Generally, this means voting. Civic engagement, on the other hand, consists of participation that targets attaining a public good, but usually through working in cooperation with others and rarely extends to electoral politics. The most prominent example of this kind of participation is volunteer work in one's community.

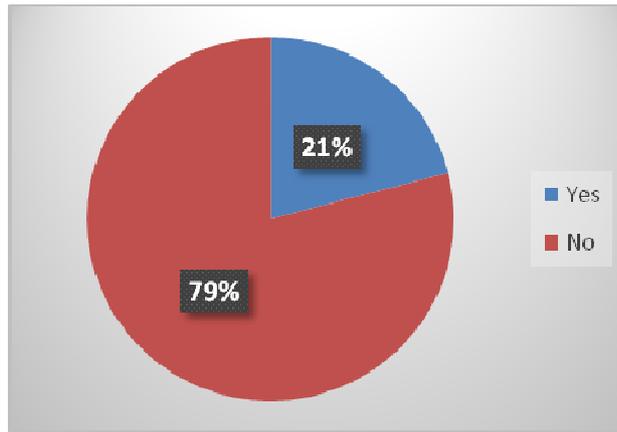
## **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

As a preliminary step, the students were split into small groups that engaged in debates. The topics were all linked with their community, their views on citizenship and politics and how they spend their time. I found out that most of the students who took part in the discussions were comfortable talking about their communities, their daily activities, or their negative attitudes about politics and politicians. They also spoke openly about the sporadic and regular volunteer work that some of them engaged in. When we shifted our discussion to more manifest political forms of engagement, it was a very different story altogether. Only a few could describe their own political experiences. Most had not thought much about it. When questioned about the responsibilities to be carried out by a citizen, few students answered following aspects such as speaking more on ethical conduct, looking after one's family, staying informed, and occasionally being a good neighbor. Surprisingly, few mentioned about voting.

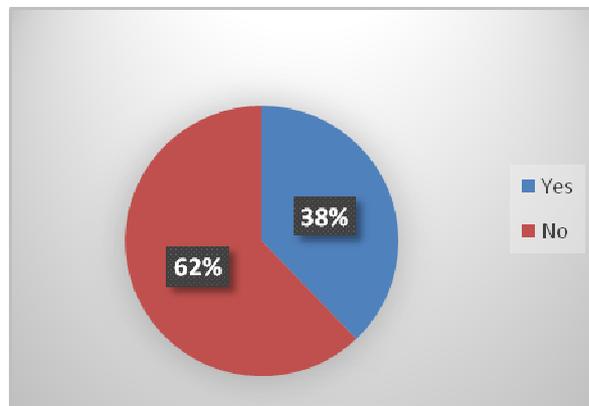
Since the conclusions and findings that emerged from the foregone discussions are not reliable enough, I conducted a quantitative study in the spring of 2018; 242 students, of semester six, aged between 18 and 35 responded to a questionnaire based on the some indicators. The participants are students of the English department studies from four different Moroccan faculties. The objective was to provide a more comprehensive assessment of the current state of public engagement among the students of the English departments in the foregone faculties. For this reason, a set of survey questions was used to cover interrelated dimensions of the activity described earlier as political, civic, and expressive (public voice), in addition to cognitive engagement. By volunteering activity, it would mean that working in some way to help others for no pay. Students sometimes volunteer for environmental organizations; civic or community organizations involved in health or social services this could be a social organism to help the poor, the elderly, the homeless, or a hospital; organizations involved with youth, children, or education. One of the objectives was to find out if these volunteering activities were done within an association or on an individual basis.

The responses to the questionnaire confirmed the conclusions obtained from the already mentioned discussions. In fact, few students see themselves in explicitly political terms and expressed their disengagement both behaviorally and psychologically in the world of candidates, campaigns, public policy debates, and so on. This is not to say that they are disconnected from the wider world or apathetic about the problems facing society. But, if at all, they are socially engaged, it is done through individual civic activity rather than through a formal one.

Concerning membership in social organisms, 21% said that they are members of associations and non-governmental organizations (figure 1); however, only 13% said that they have already done volunteering activities organized by social organisms. This percentage increases up to 38% as concerns helping others in an informal way (figure 2), i.e., on an individual basis. This shows that our students have the will and tendency to help those in need of help. However, in order to further maximize this will and inclination, associations should approach these students and prompt them to work in a formal setting where they can learn the necessary skills and strategies of serving their communities.

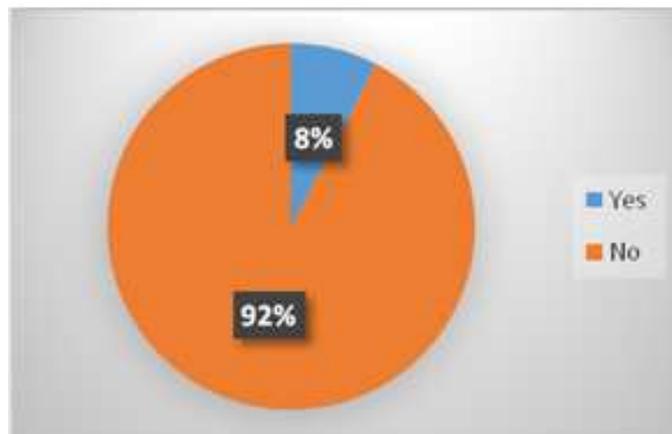


**Figure 1: Membership in Non-Governmental Organizations.**

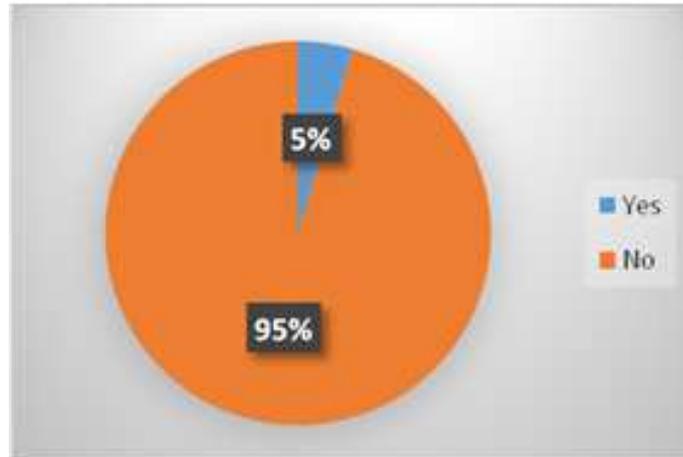


**Figure 2: Social Service on Individual Basis.**

Similarly, the students are not so keen on manifesting formal political behavior, but prefer to do it in a more latent way. In other words, students seem to be reluctant to be directly engaged in political activities, such as voting. As figure 3 shows, only 8% said they voted in the last 2016 elections, and 95% expressed their unwillingness to vote in the next elections (figure 4). It is not only to infer that the number of the young voters is low, but also it is emerged from the responses that this figure is unfortunately expected to plummet. This expected decrease is to be partly accounted for due to the participants' mistrust of politicians and their failure to keep the promises they ambitiously voice during their electoral campaigns.

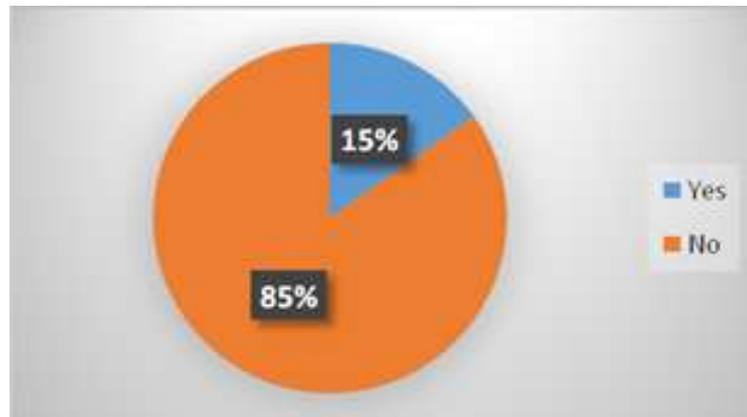


**Figure 3: Voting in the Previous Elections.**



**Figure 4: Voting Intentions for the Next Elections**

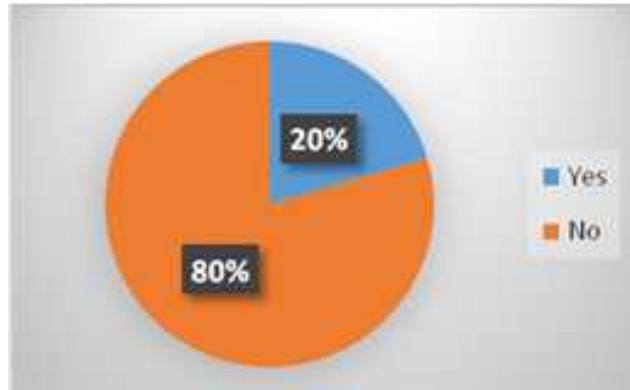
When asked whether the participants have already helped a candidate in her/his electoral campaign or not, 15% answered positively, as shown in figure 5.



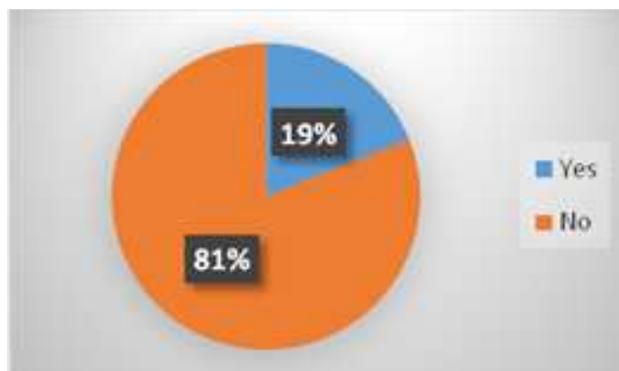
**Figure 5: Volunteering for Election Campaign.**

The score seems to be considerably high in comparison with the figure related to voting, as shown in figure 3 and figure 4. We can explain this score with a fact that some students do help candidates in their campaigns not out of political convictions, but because they are paid for the help they render to the candidates. This behavior is by no means surprising because some of the candidates themselves join the political at the last moment coming from another political party for an electoral reason, hoping to win a seat in the parliament. Thus, both the candidates and the young who help them in the election campaigns are driven by their own interest, not by that of the common good.

However, the participants showed more enthusiasm in being more active through voice and cognitive engagement. In fact, the scores seem to be higher in comparison with formal manifest political participation; the results proved that 20% of the participants have already signed petitions, as showed in figure 6 and 19% have already taken part in legal demonstrations as illustrated in figure 7. These results show that the participants are engaged through voicing their opinion, signing petitions and participating in legal demonstrations, but not necessarily through electoral voting. These types of engagement come to the forefront thanks to the usage of social media platforms that host activists who post petitions for signature or summon and coordinate efforts to organize demonstrations.

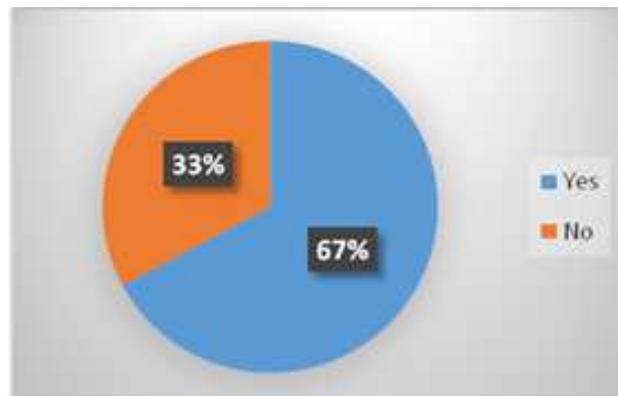


**Figure 6: Signing Petitions.**

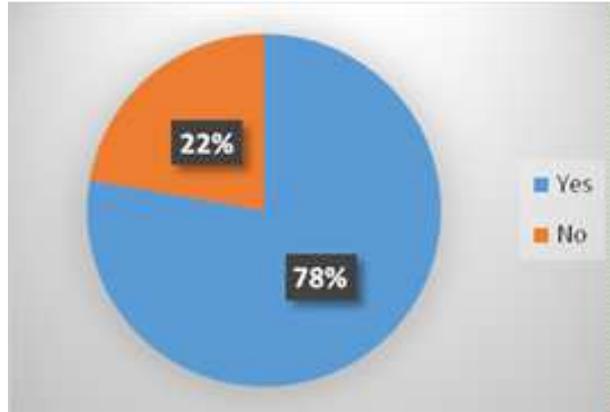


**Figure 7: Participating in Legal Demonstrations.**

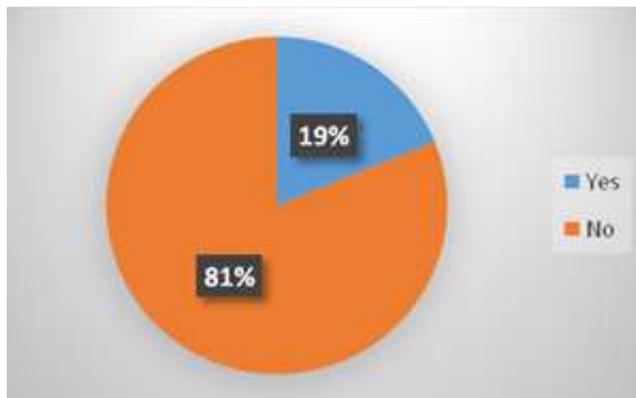
In the same vein, a significant number of the participants (67%) have frequently taken part in the political discussion as shown in figure 8, and 22% follow news written in media, as illustrated in figure 9. There is also a tendency among our tertiary students (19%) to contact online media to express their opinions about public affairs to make their voices heard, see figure (10). Thus, the participants express their view and cognitive engagement in a more tangible way when compared to their civic and political engagement. This tendency is to be accounted for by their intellectual level and their mastering of the information and communication technologies.



**Figure 8: Discussing Politics with Parents and Friends.**



**Figure 9: Interest in the News in the Media.**



**Figure 10: Communication and Contact with the Media to Express Opinion.**

There is also a tendency among our tertiary students (19%) to contact online media to express their opinions about public affairs to make their voices heard, as seen in figure 10. Thus, the participants express their view and cognitive engagement in a more tangible way when compared to their civic and political engagement. This tendency is to be accounted for by their intellectual level and their mastering of the information and communication technologies.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There are numerous ways to categorize the various kinds of citizen involvement in public life; however, this paper focuses on four types of engagement, namely, civic, political, voice, and cognitive engagements. The results have not shown a total disengagement of the participants; however, it has emerged from the findings that the Moroccan students involved in this study, at the university level, tend to be engaged in a more informal and latent way. The results have also shown that these students are more cognitively engaged and tend to voice their engagement via signing petitions, contacting written or online media platforms, talking about politics, or participating in demonstrations. However, the participants seem to be less politically active, especially when it comes to turning out in joining political parties, or contacting political officials. Several factors account for our students’ political reluctance and passiveness. In fact, the government members’ image is tarnished by scandals, politicians fail to keep their promises, political parties immerse themselves in futile conflicts, citizens are dissatisfied with the poor achievement of the government, and the elections are characterized by the absence of transparency. All these factors have led to disillusionment with politics and government and eroded youth’s trust in the honesty, credibility, and integrity of political leaders. However, this study shows that there is no room for talking about

political apathy among the respondents. All that we have to do is broaden our scope and perception of political and civic participation. While the young abstain from formal mainstream politics, they remain interested in politics, but engage differently. More new and recent forms of engagement emerge. They take part in marches, organize sit-ins, sign petitions, and post their opinions and ideas on social platforms.

As the saying goes, ‘charity begins at home.’ The proverb means that individuals should be exposed to civil socializing experiences early in life, which will enable them to acquire the required skills and attitudes for active citizenship. This socialization will increase their likelihood to be engaged as active citizens. Such exposure includes a situation where they are brought up by parents who have the habit of volunteering and also in situation where they hear frequent political discussions with family members. To put it in other terms, students who had frequent household political discussions during young age and those who grew up in homes where someone volunteered are more likely to be involved in social and political activities and are likely to be cognitively engaged than those who grew up without these experiences. The next to focus is about role of education. The latter is a real motivator that works both directly and indirectly on engagement. In this vein, schools are expected to facilitate and include community service or volunteer work. Besides, the curriculum should consist of explicit civics and government content, as well as opportunities and incentives to pay attention to public affairs.

Open discussions via great debates and public speaking contests should also be regular part of the classroom experience on-campus. Besides teaching and research, universities should embark on a ‘third mission’ that refers to the knowledge transfer from the academic environment to the whole society. High education institutes should be a venue of reflection of how these institutions outline their interest in society’s issues. Society’s concerns should be incorporated into the high institution’s activities within partnerships so that it can fulfill its role and make a significant contribution to society. Students who study in such universities will develop “social capital” by getting to know people through groups or organizations and are provided with more opportunities to meet others. By doing so, students increase their trust in others and develop habits of reciprocity. In short, universities that adopt ‘Third mission’ strategies for economic, political, and social development will yield citizens who are not motivated merely by selfish concerns and their vested interest but are aware of the needs of others.

Our universities face a crisis of public confidence. To achieve the objectives of the country’s higher education system, the sector needs to find new ways of working jointly with the broader society. ‘Third mission’ programs and strategies are one way among others to sort out this lack of public confidence. However, these programs cannot be implemented without the involvement of civil society in education, as it supports aid effectiveness and makes policy processes more democratic. This paper’s emphasis is to prompt our universities to be more explicit in their mission statements, open up channels of communication, and build up partnerships with social and non- political associations. Such endeavors will equip our students with the necessary skills of civic and political engagement.

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