THE POLITICS OF BEING APOLITICAL: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF PROTEST

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ABSTRACT

The debate between whether protest against elected governments can be apolitical has been reignited due to the increase in the number of civic based protest around the world. This essay examines the relationship between protest, politics, and democratic participation by non-partisan citizenry, and asks whether movements that reject formal political identity can still be understood as legitimate exercises of democratic citizenship. It argues that many reject association with a party structure and commitment to a political ideology but they are no less committed to an issue based cause to influence policy change through democratic ways of protest. Drawing upon political theory, constitutional principles and contemporary instances from India and around the world the paper contends that apolitical protests represent legitimate forms of democratic participation and should be seen in that light rather than the participants forced to declare respective political identity or forced to praise or criticise a particular political ideology. It further argues that such protests should be assessed on their own terms, rather than requiring participants to declare a political identity or to align with, praise, or criticise a particular political ideology. In doing so, the paper situates issue based civic mobilisation as a constitutionally significant, if under theorised, feature of democratic practice beyond the electoral process.

Key Words: - *Apolitical protest; Civic mobilisation; Constitutional accountability, Democratic participation; Judicial review; Non-partisan citizenship*

INTRODUCTION

The democratic world is witnessing major civic mobilisation against the ruling class, demonstrating it as a fundamental character of a vibrant democracy. In India the student protests have forced introduction of new government policy with greater accountability and institutional reforms[1]. Similarly, in Kenya youth mobilisations have challenged corruption and governance failures[2], while in Hungary people have been demanding constitutional reforms and accountability[3]. The government in Bulgaria last year was forced to resign as a result of the first official 'Gen Z' protest[4]. In Türkiye, citizens mobilised against governance deficiencies whereas Europe and North America saw large scale solidarity demonstrations against the war in West Asia and Eastern Europe[5]. Although these movements differ in their objectives and political contexts, they illustrate citizenship participation in public protest to address specific grievances distinct from those only aligned with political structure and ideology[6]. These developments raise a normative question, can such movements be characterised as political or can legitimately be seen as apolitical, often termed as civic participation.

Before proceeding further in this essay, it is important to first understand the meaning of the terms 'political' and 'apolitical'. Politics is who gets what, when, how[7]. Max

[1] *See* **From JP to Nirbhaya: The Delhi Protests That Changed India,** *The Indian Express* (2026); **From Nav Nirman to NEET: Protests That Changed India's Politics and Policy**, *Business Standard* (2026).

[2] Brookings Institution, "What Gen Z Protests Reveal about Kenya's Democracy" (7 April 2026), available at: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-gen-z-protests-reveal-about-kenyas-democracy/ (last visited 11 September 2026); Journal of Democracy, "Why Kenya's Gen Z Has Taken to the Streets" (2 December 2025), available at: https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-kenyas-gen-z-has-taken-to-the-streets/ (last visited 11 September 2026).

[3] Human Rights Watch, "Hungary: Fundamental Law Changes Attack Rule of Law, Rights" (17 April 2025), available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/17/hungary-fundamental-law-changes-attack-rule-law-rights (last visited 11 September 2026).

[4] European Correspondent, "How Gen Z Made Bulgaria's Government Resign" (16 December 2025), available at: https://europeancorrespondent.com/en/r/how-gen-z-made-bulgarias-government-resign (last visited 11 September 2026).

[5] Al Jazeera, "Istanbul Divided as Erdogan Rival's Arrest Sparks Anti-Government Protests" (26 March 2025), available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/3/26/istanbul-divided-as-erdogan-rivals-arrest-sparks-anti-government-protests (last visited 11 September 2026).

[6] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), "Europe and Central Asia Overview: June 2025" (5 June 2025), available at: https://acleddata.com/update/europe-and-central-asia-overview-june-2025 (last visited 11 September 2026).

[7] Harold D. Lasswell, Politics: Who Gets What, When, How (McGraw-Hill 1936).

Weber defines Politics as closely associated with the struggle for power or influencing the distribution of power within a state or among groups within it[8]. In the Indian context the larger understanding is that politics is the process through which people who govern the country are elected[9]. When citizens of India vote in Lok Sabha or State Assembly elections to choose their representatives, political parties campaign to form governments and elected Parliamentarians enact laws which ultimately determine how money will be spent on roads, schools, hospitals, or welfare schemes, this entire process constitutes politics. Therefore when someone describes something as 'political,' they mean how power in the society is exercised and how resources, rights, duties and responsibilities are distributed among citizens and non-citizens.

The expression "apolitical" often creates conceptual confusion. Apolitical generally means not concerned with, involved in, or influenced by politics or political activity. Many protesters claim that they are not affiliated with any political party and they intend to remain electorally neutral by refusing to endorse a political ideology. These distinctions are significant because rejecting party affiliation does not necessarily eliminate the political nature of protest. A movement demanding legislative reform, judicial intervention, or executive accountability inevitably engages with political authority regardless of party affiliation. Therefore, many apolitical protests are more accurately described as non-partisan rather than apolitical[10].

This paper begins by tracing the conceptual boundary between political and apolitical action, arguing that rejecting party affiliation is better described as non-partisanship than as an absence of politics. It then examines democracy beyond the electoral process, situating protest, judicial review, and public interest litigation as continuous mechanisms of constitutional accountability. It further engages with the principal critique of apolitical citizenship that in a democracy everything is political and responds by distinguishing political consequence from political intent. Finally, drawing on comparative instances from India, Brazil, South Korea, and global climate

[8] Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation" in H.H. Gerth & C.W. Mills (eds & trans), From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology (Oxford University Press 1946) 77.
[9] Robert A. Dahl, Democracy and Its Critics (Yale University Press 1989); David Easton, A Framework for Political Analysis (Prentice-Hall 1965).
[10] Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (University of Chicago Press 1958).

and accountability movements, the paper argues that issue based, non-partisan protest constitutes a legitimate and constitutionally significant form of democratic participation that ought to be assessed on its own terms.

UNDERSTANDING POLITICS BEYOND ELECTIONS

The notion of democracy as only electoral supremacy would be a poor comprehension of this form of governance. Democracy has much more to it than just elections, political parties, campaigns and results. Democracy is a collaborative community driven decision making where everyone gets to take part in the process. Democracy beyond elections would mean focusing on continuous citizen participation, social justice, institutional accountability civic engagement, public deliberation and the protection of human rights[11]. This participation is reflected through peaceful protests, public interest litigation, the exercise of the Right to Information, local self-governance through Panchayati Raj Institutions, and the activities of civil society organisations. For instance the last decade and a half has seen Indian citizens protesting against corruption forcing the government to pass the ombudsman legislation[12], protest against women safety in 2013 prompting the parliament to pass stronger legislation for crime against women[13], 2017 protest relating to community representation in educational institutes in Gujarat[14], Anti CAA-NRC protest to farmer protest in 2021[15] and recent student protest against question paper leaks of national level exams for medical colleges show citizens participation in democratic governance through public protest[16].

[11] Jurgen Habermas, Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy (MIT Press 1996).

[12] The Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 (Act No. 1 of 2014), Government of India, available at: https://egazette.nic.in (last visited 11 September 2026).

[13] The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 (Act No. 13 of 2013), Government of India, available at: https://egazette.nic.in (last visited 11 September 2026).

[14] Achyut Yagnik & Suchitra Sheth, The Shaping of Modern Gujarat: Plurality, Hindutva, and Beyond (Penguin Random House India 2019).

[15] The Farm Laws Repeal Act, 2021, Government of India, available at: https://egazette.nic.in (last visited 11 September 2026); Human Rights Watch, "Shoot the Traitors: Discrimination Against Muslims Under India's New Citizenship Policy" (10 April 2020), available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/04/10/shoot-traitors/discrimination-against-muslims-under-indias-new (last visited 11 September 2026).

[16] Press Trust of India, "NEET-UG Paper Leak Protests and Demands for Examination Reforms" (2024), available at: https://www.ptinews.com (last visited 11 September 2026).

The judiciary constitutes another important avenue through which democracy operates beyond elections. In India, constitutional courts enable citizens through judicial orders to enforce executive and legislative constitutional compliance through judicial review and Public Interest Litigation (PIL). Judicial remedies provide a continuous mechanism for safeguarding constitutional rights and ensuring governmental accountability. Landmark decisions such as Keshvanand Bharti vs Union of India[17] which limits the legislative power to amend the Indian constitution, Maneka Gandhi vs Union of India[18] which restricts executive highhandedness in procedural claims, Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan[19], which laid down guidelines against sexual harassment against women at the workplace, People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India [20], which expanded the enforcement of socio-economic rights and the environmental jurisprudence developed through the M.C. Mehta cases[21] illustrate how citizens, organisations have influenced public policy through the courts[22]. Moreover constitutional challenges to legislations and electoral reforms have further demonstrated that judicial institutions serve as an essential forum for democratic contestation[23]. Thus, by facilitating access to justice, enforcing constitutional limitations on state power the judiciary reinforces the idea that democracy is a continuous constitutional process rather than an event confined to elections.

APOLITICAL CITIZENSHIP AND ITS CRITICS: IS EVERYTHING POLITICAL?

The idea of being apolitical has always been seen as shrugging responsibility as citizen and many criticise people who claim to be apolitical. The criticism comes from the fact that in a democracy everything is political especially in a country like India that sees political activities 24/7 in various forms. Also politics has entered day to day lives of all citizens from education, public policy, environment, taxes etc and therefore

[17] Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala, (1973) 4 SCC 225.
[18] Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India, (1978) 1 SCC 248.
[19] Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan, (1997) 6 SCC 241.
[20] People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India, (2001) 5 SCC 577.
[21] M.C. Mehta v. Union of India, (1987) 1 SCC 395.
[22] S.P. Sathe, Judicial Activism in India: Transgressing Borders and Enforcing Limits (Oxford University Press 2002).
[23] Upendra Baxi, The Indian Supreme Court and Politics (Eastern Book Company 1985).

"everything is political" has become a central criticism of apolitical citizenship[24].

The idea of apolitical citizenship is also seen critically because the consequences of politics does not discriminates based on belief system and democracy mandates majority will and if a very large segment of citizens do not oppose policies detrimental to the public it would reinforce existing power structures[25]. Also critics point out that people who claim to be apolitical practice politics in everyday life with the choices that they make from consumer behaviour to investment decisions to online advocacy everything will have a political stamp so the line between political and apolitical acts becomes blurred and therefore claiming to be apolitical is not practical.

Being apolitical does not mean indifference toward political issues, public policy and governance, it just that some citizens don't feel comfortable identifying under a stated political ideology or actively taking membership of a structured political outfit. Most apolitical citizens are interested in outcomes rather than political means[26]. The legitimacy of an apolitical process derives from moral authority, public participation and issue based advocacy and not electoral representation. This form of advocacy as opposed to political is a democratic engagement of issues which should also have equal space in a vibrant democracy and not be seen as omission of citizenship participation duty.

Across the world, several major policy changes have originated from citizen movements that were not formally aligned with political parties. Most of the apolitical or citizenship led movement are organic, people centric and unorganised as compared to people under political banner. The mechanisms of apolitical movement include public demonstration to gather public attention, online presence is boosted as it's the easiest means to reach the wider audience around the world, involvement of known members from civil society that lend voice and credibility to the movement and finally involving mainstream and digital media that can amplify the protests key issues, demands and address concerns from people who are still undecided about joining the

[24] Adrian Leftwich, What Is Politics? The Activity and Its Study (Polity 2004).
[25] Dahl, supra note 9.
[26] Mark E. Warren, Democracy and Association (Princeton University Press 2001).

protests.

The world has witnessed a number of apolitical movements that have brought out important reforms in political space. The examples include the anti-corruption movement in Brazil during the "Operation Car Wash" investigations against corruption which led to impeachments and public scrutiny of official[27]. In 2016-2017 South Korea saw civil society seeking accountability from their President for more transparency in public sphere and constitutional governance[28]. Global climate movements advocated by students forced widespread dialogues on climate change and its impact not only in their respective countries but also forced foreign governments to take note as climate change cannot be contained by territorial borders[29]. Many participants of these climate change movements have had no formal party affiliation but have successfully transformed climate change into a vocal political issue. The global #MeToo movement was a citizenship led accountability movement towards safe working space for women[30]. During the COVID-19 citizen organizations, volunteers, resident welfare associations, influenced governmental policy and responses[31]. Governments were forced to modify vaccination strategies, oxygen availability, hospital resource allocation and relief measures in favour of the public.

Issue based participation demonstrates that citizens can engage with matters of public concern without becoming politically aligned. A person can claim to be against corruption, advocate for climate change, or support a particular education structure which can be based on ethical or humanitarian considerations rather than any political alignment. One of the biggest considerations that distinguishes a political person with an apolitical person is that an apolitical person does not desire to acquire political

[27]Timothy J. Power & Matthew M. Taylor (eds), Corruption and Democracy in Brazil: The Struggle for Accountability (University of Notre Dame Press 2011); Matthew M. Taylor, Decadent Developmentalism: The Political Economy of Democratic Brazil (Cambridge University Press 2019).
[28] Gi-Wook Shin & Rennie J. Moon, South Korea's Democratic Crisis and the Candlelight Revolution (Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University 2017).
[29] Dana R. Fisher & Sohana Nasrin, "Climate Activism and Its Effects" (2021) 12(1) Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change e683.
[30] Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose & Jessalynn Keller, "#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture Through Digital Feminist Activism" (2018) 25(2) European Journal of Women's Studies 236.
[31] United Nations, Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity: Responding to the Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 (2020), available at: https://www.un.org/ (last visited 11 September 2026).

power or influence electoral outcomes thereby representing an alternative mode of democratic participation[32].

The contradiction is not in the belief that politics does not affect everyone, of course it does but in a dynamic society one needs to see how politics is understood by different individuals. Not everyone will see issues from the same lens and there will be many who would comprehend issues in a wider sense whereas others may have narrow understanding and that it cannot be a basis for dismissing that opinion. What matters at the end is that everybody is allowed to participate actively in civic life with the freedom that one seeks.

Apolitical citizen's advocacy and protests strengthens democracy. It allows citizenship participation beyond electoral activities and enabling executive accountability during their terms. Issue based mobilization allows civil society to unite around common public concerns. The civil society led protests also encourages evidence based policymaking, as governments frequently are forced to appoint expert committees and consultation mechanisms in response to sustained public demands. Finally, peaceful civic participation ensures government decisions reflect public expectations.

CONCLUSION

The discussion establishes that the binary of political and apolitical protest does not withstand close scrutiny. Civic mobilisation against the state seeking to influence legislative, executive, or judicial outcomes is, in a structural sense, political, since it engages with the distribution and exercise of power. What distinguishes apolitical protest is not its distance from politics but its distance from party structure and ideological allegiance. Whether through movements against corruption, protests demanding accountability, climate activism, campaigns for women's safety, or protests for examination reform, citizens demonstrate that they can engage meaningfully with public concerns without seeking electoral power or aligning themselves with a particular political ideology. This form of participation deserves recognition as a legitimate, constitutionally grounded mode of democratic engagement rather than

[32] Carole Pateman, Participation and Democratic Theory (Cambridge University Press 1970); Warren, supra note 26.

being dismissed. Democracies that treat non-partisan, issue based protest as a parallel and legitimate channel of accountability alongside political parties; judiciary and formal political institutions are better placed to remain responsive to their citizens needs between election cycles. Apolitical citizenship, properly understood, is not a retreat from politics but an alternative and equally valid mode of practising it which should be encouraged.

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