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Campus Party Wings and Future Political Leaders: Evidence from the University of Malawi

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Abstract

University-based youth wings are a common but under-examined feature of party politics across sub-Saharan Africa. This study examines how participation in political party wings at the University of Malawi (UNIMA) shapes the development of future political leaders. Drawing on political socialisation theory, it uses semi-structured interviews with twenty participants—seven students, six alumni, four party officials, and three lecturers—analysed thematically. Three findings stand out. First, the wings operate as formally constituted organisations with elected executives that mirror national party structures and remain tied to their parent parties, positioning them as bridges between campus and national politics rather than autonomous student clubs. Second, participation shapes political ambition unevenly: for students with prior interest it consolidates existing aspirations, while for others sustained exposure to party leaders generates new ambition. Third, members acquire transferable competencies, cross-party networks, and democratic dispositions such as tolerance and acceptance of electoral defeat. These gains are double-edged because the same socialisation can build democratic dispositions and draw members into patronage networks. They are further constrained by unreliable party funding, the difficulty of balancing politics against coursework, and the absence of university recognition, which pushes activity off campus. The study concludes that wings are consequential but institutionally conditional agents of political socialisation.

1 Introduction

Across most multiparty democracies, political parties maintain youth wings to recruit, mobilise, and train young members (McDonnell et al. 2024). These organisations are widespread, yet comparative scholarship has given them limited attention relative to their role in party life (Malafaia et al. 2018). Where youth wings operate on university campuses, they intersect with a second claim long made about higher education: that universities are not only sites of academic training but also formative environments for political leadership. Altbach (1997) traces this role from the student protests of 1960s Europe and North America to later waves of campus activism, while political socialisation theory holds that young adulthood is a decisive period in which durable political attitudes and behaviours take shape (Greenstein 1965). Participation in structured political organisations during the university years may therefore carry consequences for later political engagement. This concern is sharpened by a recurring pattern in the youth-participation literature: young people are often active in protest, social movements, and digital activism while remaining marginal to formal institutions such as parties and legislatures (Checkoway and Aldana 2013). Campus party wings are one of the few formal channels that sit between these two domains.

Sub-Saharan Africa is a salient setting for this question. The region has one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age of roughly nineteen years (Worldometer 2024), and university students have repeatedly stood at the centre of national political change, from the pro-democracy movements of the late twentieth century in Zambia, South Africa, and Malawi to more recent mobilisations (Gyimah-Boadi 1998). In Malawi, people under thirty-five make up about four-fifths of the population (Botha 2022),

and the 1995 Constitution established the framework within which expanded political freedoms have since developed. Despite this demographic weight, young Malawians remain under-represented in formal decision-making, constrained by limited finance, patronage networks, and few leadership openings.

The University of Malawi (UNIMA) hosts campus wings of several major parties, including the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), and the United Transformation Movement (UTM). The civic voluntarism model holds that people participate in politics when they have the resources, psychological engagement, and recruitment networks to do so (Alscher et al. 2025), and campus wings plausibly supply civic skills of this kind, including public speaking, organisation, and networking. For the Malawian case, however, it remains unclear whether such participation translates into sustained political involvement after graduation or remains confined to the campus. Existing Malawian research concentrates on youth participation in elections and on the barriers young people face (Mbulaje et al. 2021; Numeri 2021), rather than on how the university years themselves function as a site of leadership formation. Mbulaje et al. (2021) examine factors shaping youth participation in political governance in Blantyre, and Numeri (2021) documents party policies, motivations, challenges, and career prospects for young members nationally; neither addresses the specific developmental work that campus wings may perform.

This gap matters because the answer bears on practical questions of party renewal and democratic consolidation. If campus wings cultivate competent, tolerant, and ambitious future leaders, they merit support and recognition; if their role is confined to supplying campaign labour, the case for strengthening leadership training elsewhere is stronger. Reports from within Malawian politics suggest the developmental promise is not being realised: a Centre for Social Research study found a marked decline in youth participation in political and development activities (Nyasa Times 2024), and party figures have observed that youth wings are rarely briefed on national development frameworks such as Agenda 2063 (Nyasa Times 2024). Against this background, the present study examines how participation in university political party wings shapes the formation of future political leaders, using UNIMA as the site of analysis.

The study is guided by one main question: how does participation in political party wings at the university help shape political leaders? Three subsidiary questions follow from this concern: how the wings are structured within UNIMA; what experiences students gain through participation; and how former student activists describe the influence of campus politics on their leadership trajectories. The analysis proceeds from the premise that wings are best understood not as peripheral student clubs but as agents of political socialisation embedded in national party structures, and it traces both what that embedding makes possible and what it constrains.

2 Conceptual and theoretical framework

The study treats university political party wings as one institutional channel through which students are socialised into political life. The conceptual interest lies in three linked outcomes of participation—

leadership skills, political awareness, and civic engagement—and in the features of the university environment that enable or limit their development. These outcomes are not assumed; they are what the analysis sets out to trace through participants' accounts.

2.1 Political socialisation theory

Political socialisation is the process through which individuals acquire political identities, beliefs, and behaviours over the life course, shaped by family, peers, education, and wider social experience (Greenstein 1965; Longley 2024). Almond and Powell (1992) define it broadly, encompassing formal and informal, intended and unintended learning—not only explicit political instruction but the attitudes and dispositions that condition political behaviour. This breadth is what makes the theory useful here. It allows campus wings to be read not merely as venues for deliberate political training through meetings and recruitment drives, but as settings where leadership is formed through everyday interaction: peer debate, student elections, exposure to party rhetoric, and the ordinary work of running an organisation.

The theory also supplies a developmental claim with direct bearing on the study. Almond and Verba (1963) argue that a stable democracy rests on a supportive political culture transmitted through socialisation, and Easton and Dennis (1969) hold that individuals build attachment to political institutions gradually, through repeated exposure. These classic formulations require qualification in a setting such as Malawi. The civic-culture tradition was built on mid-century Western democracies and has been criticised for treating the political culture of those societies as a developmental endpoint; applied uncritically to post-colonial African contexts, it can misread socialisation that runs through patronage and ethnic networks as a deficit rather than as a different institutional logic (Mugume and Luescher 2017). The present study therefore uses the framework not to measure UNIMA against a civic-culture ideal but to trace what is actually transmitted through the wings, which, as the findings show, includes both democratic dispositions and the norms of clientelist exchange. Read this way, UNIMA's party wings are structured agents of socialisation: they organise events, debates, and campaigns that draw students into sustained engagement with political ideas and actors (Asma and Rauf 2023). The framework accordingly directs attention to three mechanisms (ideological transmission, leadership exposure, and political networking) through which wing participation might shape students' ambitions and trajectories. Each of these mechanisms is examined against the interview evidence in the findings that follow, rather than asserted in advance.

3 Literature review

3.1 Youth wings as party organisations

Youth wings are formal sub-organisations of political parties established to mobilise and engage young people (McDonnell et al. 2024). They are common across democracies on every continent, yet, as Malafaia et al. (2018) note, scholarly knowledge about their internal life remains thin. The literature attributes several functions to them. They serve as entry points for recruitment, drawing in young

members who may stay politically active over time (Pickard 2019); they perform mobilisation and campaigning work, particularly during elections; and they provide an environment in which ambitious young members acquire organisational experience, engage in ideological argument, and build skills relevant to later political roles (McDonnell et al. 2024). Read together, these accounts position youth wings—including those on campuses—as structures that support recruitment, mobilisation, training, and the preparation of young people for fuller participation in formal politics.

3.2 Youth political participation in Malawi

Definitions of youth vary; Malawi's National Youth Policy sets the range at ten to thirty-five years (Government of Malawi 2013), a band that captures roughly four-fifths of the population (Botha 2022). Participation is widely treated as foundational to democratic legitimacy and stability (Salako et al. 2025), and Malawi's youthful structure represents a substantial reservoir of potential political energy. Yet formal politics remains dominated by older actors. Young people are visible during election seasons—at rallies, in campaigning, and online—but thinly represented as candidates and officeholders. Participants at a National Youth Conversation in Blantyre complained that politicians recruit them for campaign spectacle rather than substantive inclusion (Chisiano 2024). Kajoloweka, of Youth and Society, identifies the absence of youth-inclusive party policies, societal resistance to new political actors, and weak investment in leadership training as central barriers (Kaliza 2025), and a 2023 Afrobarometer survey found that 67 per cent of Malawians prioritise the wisdom of elders over the ideas of the young (Alfonso and Chunga 2023). Online activity, observers note, does not reliably convert into formal participation such as party membership or candidacy (Mvula 2024). The literature thus describes a population with political interest and capacity whose full participation is checked by structural, economic, and cultural constraints. This is the backdrop against which campus wings might function as alternative routes into political life.

3.3 University politics as a training ground for leadership

A substantial body of work treats campus political engagement as consequential for later leadership. The broader case rests on the premise that universities are not only centres of teaching and research but social institutions that form citizens and shape leaders capable of addressing governance challenges (Lebdaoui 2024). Dugan and Komives (2007) find that students who hold leadership positions are more likely to remain politically active after graduation, and Astin (1999) and Kuh (2009) link co-curricular involvement to leadership development, democratic values, and continued civic participation. In the African context, student activism has been bound up with national political change: Altbach (1989) documents universities as centres of dissent under authoritarian rule, and Barkan (2004) observes that universities in emerging democracies often serve as recruitment grounds for political elites, supplying networks, visibility, and organisational experience. Particular skills, including building trust, exercising influence, and persuading others, appear to develop through practice rather than instruction (Chau 2025), with campaigns, debates, and governance roles strengthening public speaking, negotiation, and conflict resolution (Dugan and Komives 2007).

The same literature flags limits. Altbach (1989) cautions that excessive partisanship and factionalism can distort both academic life and leadership development, and that where campus structures replicate national patronage systems, they may reward loyalty over competence and crowd out ethical leadership. For Malawi specifically, scholarship on the link between campus politics and national leadership careers is sparse; most studies address elections, governance challenges, or democratisation broadly rather than the developmental function of campus party wings. This is the gap the present study addresses.

3.4 Comparative evidence

Cross-national cases show campus wings serving as platforms for socialisation and leadership formation, with considerable variation. In the United States, the campus affiliates of the Young Democrats and Young Republicans are among the most widespread student political organisations, attracting members who intend political careers (Lipset and Altbach 1966). In Portugal, youth sections are notably autonomous, often advancing agendas more radical than their parent parties (Malafaia et al. 2018), an independence that exposes members to internal debate and self-directed decision-making. Singapore illustrates the opposite pole: the law forbids campus chapters of parties at autonomous universities, so students engage national parties only off-campus (Gjorgievska 2012). In India, the student wings of national parties have functioned as grooming grounds, with several cabinet-level figures having begun in student unions (Mohanty 2025).

African cases sit closer to the Malawian setting. In Ghana, the two major parties maintain affiliated networks (the Tertiary Education Institutions Network and the Tertiary Students Confederacy) across almost all tertiary institutions, organising rallies and seminars that draw students into party ideology and processes (Boateng 2025). In Kenya, student activism is shaped by ethnic and party alliances that can degrade leadership quality, yet it remains an important arena for political education and civic development (Mukuna and Mutsotso 2015). Malawi's own multiparty system, established in 1993, conditions how students engage (Tenthani and Chinsinga 2016), but Numeri (2021) finds youth participation there largely informal and weakly supported by party structures, which narrows the path into formal leadership. These cases frame the empirical question: where on this spectrum—from autonomous training ground to peripheral campaign auxiliary, do UNIMA's wings fall?

3.5 The contested character of youth wings: clientelism, exclusion, and contested space

A developmental reading of youth wings has to be set against a substantial body of work documenting their darker functions. Across sub-Saharan Africa, party youth structures have served as instruments of clientelist mobilisation and, at the sharper end, of intimidation. Mugume and Luescher's (2017) study of Makerere University shows the mechanism clearly: relationships between student leaders and national parties are built on resource exchange, with parties supplying material support and recruitment opportunities in return for mobilisation, so that the recruitment of student cadres becomes the most important function of party involvement in campus politics. The same logic has a coercive edge. Studies of party foot soldiers and youth cadres in Ghana and Zambia link these structures to low-intensity

electoral violence and to patronage networks that reward loyalty over competence (Bob-Milliar 2014; Resnick and Casale 2014). In the Malawian usage, the figure of the party “cadet” or cadre carries precisely this connotation of partisan enforcement, and such enforcement is best understood within the wider patterns of negotiated, everyday authority through which order is produced in Malawi (Grassin 2022). The implication for the present study is not that the developmental and coercive readings are mutually exclusive but that they describe the same institution: the socialisation that transmits tolerance and organisational skill can also induct members into patronage and partisan aggression, and a credible account must hold both in view.

A second qualification concerns gender. Student politics in Southern African universities is frequently patriarchal in structure, channelling women into welfare or “women’s director” roles while reserving the most powerful executive positions for men. Makura and Omodan (2024) describe the “politics of process” through which institutional, cultural, and societal practices reproduce women’s marginalisation in university leadership in the region, identifying patriarchy and self-limiting expectations alongside institutional barriers. This literature cautions against reading skills, networks, and ambition as uniformly available to all members; the developmental benefits of wing participation are likely to be unevenly distributed by gender, a possibility this study notes but did not design to test.

A third development concerns where campus politics now happens. As universities restrict formal party activity on campus, students increasingly use social media as an alternative informal space for mobilisation, debate, and contact with leaders (Winyi et al. 2023). This matters for any account of access in the Malawian case, where, as the findings show, the absence of recognition already pushes wing activity off campus. Digital platforms may partly substitute for the physical spaces students are denied, reshaping how socialisation and recruitment occur. The present study collected interview data on in-person activity and does not measure this digital dimension; it is flagged here, and again in the research agenda, as an important boundary of the analysis.

4 Methodology

4.1 Design and approach

The study used a qualitative design suited to its concern with meaning, experience, and process. Because the research asks how participation shapes ambition, skills, and dispositions, or how students interpret their own political development, a qualitative approach was appropriate (Creswell 2019). It allowed the analysis to follow the reasoning participants attached to their experiences rather than to predetermined variables, and so to reconstruct the mechanisms through which socialisation operates within the wings.

4.2 Setting, participants, and sampling

Fieldwork was conducted at UNIMA. The study drew on four stakeholder groups whose perspectives triangulate the question from different vantage points: current students active in campus wings; alumni

who had been wing members and could speak to longer-term effects; national party officials, who could indicate whether parties treat campus wings as leadership pipelines; and lecturers in the Department of Politics and Government, who observe student political life from a professional distance. In qualitative research, sample adequacy is judged by saturation—the point at which further interviews yield no new themes (Hennink and Kaiser 2022). Twenty participants were interviewed: seven students, six alumni, four party officials, and three lecturers. Recruitment combined purposive sampling, selecting individuals by direct relevance to the research questions (Makwana et al. 2023), with snowball sampling, in which early participants referred others meeting the criteria (Parker et al. 2019); the latter was valuable for reaching wing members who would otherwise have been difficult to identify. To protect anonymity, participants are identified throughout by group and number rather than by name: current students as Student 1 to Student 7, former members (graduates) as Graduate 1 to Graduate 6, national officials as Political Leader 1 to Political Leader 4, and academic staff as Lecturer 1 to Lecturer 3.

4.3 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, using a prepared but flexible question set that allowed each conversation to follow emerging lines (Creswell 2019). Interview guides were tailored to each participant group while preserving common analytic threads: the structure and operation of the wings, skills and networks acquired, effects on ambition, and challenges faced. This format let participants describe motivations, skill acquisition, and reflections on how participation shaped their political aspirations in their own terms.

4.4 Data analysis

Transcripts were prepared in clean verbatim form and analysed thematically, a method for systematically identifying and organising patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Dawadi 2020). Coding proceeded from the data while remaining attentive to the study's three objectives, so that themes were organised around the structure and operation of the wings, leadership development and ambition, and the skills, networks, and attitudes participants reported. The analysis distinguished, where the evidence allowed, between effects that consolidated pre-existing dispositions and those that appeared to generate new ones.

4.5 Ethical considerations

The study received approval from the Department of Politics and Government before data collection. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, with participants briefed on the study’s purpose and free to decline any question or withdraw at any point. Confidentiality was protected by anonymising all interviews and securely storing audio recordings (Bos 2020); participants are identified in the findings only by group and number. Given the politically sensitive setting, care was taken to ensure that discussion did not expose participants to risk to their personal safety or political standing.

4.6 Positionality and reflexivity

Two features of the design warrant reflexive comment. First, the second author supervises students in the Department from which the lecturer participants were drawn and within which student wing members study. This insider position eased access and rapport but also means the research was conducted from within the institution it examines; interpretations were therefore checked against the accounts of party officials and alumni external to the Department, rather than resting on lecturer testimony alone. Second, several participant groups had an interest in how the wings were portrayed. Lecturers who teach politics may be inclined to frame student political activity in developmental, "nursery" terms, and party officials have a clear stake in presenting wings as orderly leadership pipelines rather than as sites of patronage or disorder. These incentives were treated as part of the data: where the developmental framing came predominantly from lecturers or officials, the analysis says so, and it reads such accounts alongside students' own more mixed reports rather than as neutral description.

4.7 Limitations

Three limitations qualify the findings. First, the study was confined to UNIMA, so its findings characterise one institution and should not be generalised to other Malawian universities without further research. Second, participant availability was constrained by competing commitments, which shaped the final sample. Third, the design captured self-reported, in-person experience: it did not independently observe wing activity, did not systematically probe the clientelist or coercive dimensions that participants had little incentive to disclose, and did not examine the digital spaces through which campus mobilisation increasingly runs. The democratic dispositions participants reported should therefore be read as accounts of espoused values, not as measured behaviour, and the comparatively benign picture that emerges may partly reflect what participants were willing to say. Because the design is qualitative and interpretive, the aim is analytical insight into how wings function as socialising institutions rather than statistical generalisation.

5 Findings and discussion

The findings are organised around the study's three objectives: the organisation and operation of the wings; their effect on leadership development and political ambition; and the skills, networks, and attitudes participation confers. A fourth section examines the constraints that recur across all three. Evidence is presented and interpreted together, with participant accounts read against the socialisation framework and the comparative literature.

5.1 Organisation and operation of the wings

5.1.1 Structure and governance

The wings are formally constituted organisations run by elected executives. Accounts of their composition were consistent in form if not in detail. Student 2 described an executive of president, vice-president, welfare director, treasurer, and secretary; Student 3 listed a fuller slate including a general secretary, director of research, director of women, and publicity secretary; and Student 1 reported an

additional electoral commission and subcommittees created at the president's direction. Student 4 described elected office bearers who, once sworn in, establish subcommittees:

We do have elections that lead into these office bearers. And when the executive is sworn in, we do formulate what we call sub-committees, like the disciplinary committee and also social welfare committee.

Students 5 and 6 described comparable national-executive models of varying size, and Political Leader 3 confirmed that all DPP campus wings follow a similar pattern guided by each wing's own constitution. The recurrence of titles such as president, secretary general, treasurer, and publicity secretary indicates that students operate within structures of representation and accountability that approximate those of national parties.

This matters for socialisation. Holding office within such a structure means learning political roles through direct practice rather than observation. Political socialisation theory holds that attitudes and behaviours are acquired through interaction with political institutions and actors (Almond and Powell 1992); occupying a treasurer's or publicity secretary's post supplies exactly that interaction, in the form of decision-making, organisational management, and accountability to a membership. The finding also confirms the literature's characterisation of youth wings as organisations with genuine internal machinery rather than symbolic extensions of their parties. McDonnell et al. (2024) argue that youth wings possess their own leadership structures and decision-making processes that enable them to recruit, mobilise, and socialise members; the elected executives and subcommittees at UNIMA bear this out.

5.1.2 Relationship with parent parties

The wings are not free-standing. They manage their internal affairs but remain linked upward to national structures. Political Leader 1 described the MCP arrangement plainly:

University wings of MCP they structured by themselves, they do elections and choose leaders, but managed by Party Youth Leaders.

Political Leader 2 similarly explained that wings connect to the national party through a college coordinator. The relationship is reciprocal: wings draw support and direction from the parent party, which in turn uses them for mobilisation and recruitment. This dual character matches Correa and Rodríguez-Teruel's (2026) account of youth wings as performing two functions at once—offering young people a route into politics and leadership while serving the parent party's interest in recruiting members, transmitting ideology, and securing generational continuity. At UNIMA both functions are visible: students treat the wings as platforms for development, and parties treat them as instruments for sustaining their structures and cultivating future elites.

The upward linkage carries an analytical implication. Because leadership development here occurs inside an existing ideological and organisational frame, students learn politics through direct contact

with established party hierarchies and norms rather than in an autonomous student space. This aligns with Barkan's (2004) argument that political institutions use educational settings as recruitment grounds for future elites, and it places UNIMA's wings closer to the embedded Ghanaian model than to the autonomous Portuguese one. It also means the wings inherit the parent parties' internal divisions: studies of comparable structures elsewhere in the region find student bodies fragmented by factionalism that tracks national party rivalries (Felde 2024), a dynamic the UNIMA accounts of contested elections and disciplinary subcommittees echo. The wings are, in effect, bridges between campus and national politics, a position that, as the later discussion of constraints shows, is also the source of their vulnerability.

5.1.3 Activities and recruitment

Wing activities centre on rallies, debates, public lectures, community outreach, and participation in party events, and they bring students into direct contact with senior figures. One student recalled attending the launch of a government project by the Minister of Local Government, and others described being invited to debates by party leaders. These encounters function as experiential learning: by organising events, coordinating members, and engaging public officials, students gain practical exposure to political processes of a kind classroom instruction cannot supply. Civic-education scholarship holds that such activity helps young people understand political systems and their own rights and responsibilities (Al-Ansari et al. 2025); the wings deliver this understanding through participation rather than tuition.

The activities also serve recruitment. Participants repeatedly described the wings as spaces where students are introduced to party structures and integrated into networks that may carry them into leadership positions after graduation. This is the recruitment function McDonnell et al. (2024) and Jansson (2025) attribute to youth wings—attracting politically interested young people and channelling them toward continued involvement. That evidence comes largely from established European democracies and Australia, where parties are programmatic and comparatively well-resourced, so it transfers to Malawi only with qualification: here, as Mugume and Luescher (2017) show for Makerere, recruitment runs through resource exchange in a clientelist setting, and what a party recruits a student into is not only an organisational career but a patronage relationship. The pattern still supports Barkan's (2004) claim that universities supply ambitious, educated recruits to political life, but the recruitment observed at UNIMA carries the double character the literature on African campus politics describes. The dominant orientation of activity toward mobilisation and outreach reinforces the point: where wings function mainly as campaign auxiliaries, the developmental promise can be crowded out by the parties' immediate electoral needs, and the line between mobilisation and the deployment of student cadres for partisan ends is thin.

5.2 Leadership development and political ambition

5.2.1 Exposure to political processes

Across all four participant groups, the wings were described as sites of political socialisation, education, and leadership development. Lecturer 3 framed them in explicitly developmental terms:

They actually provide what you call political socialisation… political education. They get what you call connections. They are involved in the mainstream politics, party affairs. They invite many party leaders.

He likened the wings to a nursery in which parties cultivate future leaders, and Lecturer 2 supported the point with examples of former UNIMA students who had risen into senior governance positions. This developmental, "nursery" framing came most strongly from the lecturer and party-official interviews. Because these participants have a professional or institutional stake in presenting wings in that light, the analysis treats their accounts as one situated perspective among several and weighs them against students' more mixed accounts. The recurring mechanism participants pointed to is access. Students and alumni reported reaching ministers, regional officials, governors, and youth directors through wing activities, contact that would otherwise be out of reach. Graduate 1 said that meeting national leaders "triggered that curiosity in me to join national politics," and Student 7 reported that exposure had changed his self-understanding: "My perception about politics has changed. I can say that in the future, I hope that I will be a politician." Participants described this access as overwhelmingly face-to-face, through rallies and events; none foregrounded social media as the primary channel, although, given the restrictions on campus activity discussed below, the role of digital platforms in sustaining contact with leaders is a plausible dimension this study did not capture.

These accounts substantiate the socialisation claim that political knowledge and attitudes form through exposure to institutions and processes (Easton and Dennis 1969). The wings let students observe leaders at work, take part in political activity, and interact with people actively engaged in governance—learning by proximity and practice rather than from texts. The pattern matches McDonnell et al.'s (2024) finding that youth wings give young people organisational experience and an understanding of how parties operate. Leadership capacity here develops through both observation and participation, consistent with Chau's (2025) argument that political skill is built through experience rather than instruction.

5.2.2 Effects on ambition

The wings' effect on ambition was not uniform, and the variation is analytically important. For some participants, political interest preceded membership, and participation chiefly consolidated it. Student 2 was direct: "I wouldn't say that position has motivated me so much because the motivation was already there." Graduate 3 similarly described participation as deepening an existing interest rather than creating one. For others, involvement generated ambition that had not previously existed. Student 6 traced this shift: "By the time I was starting, I was just doing it for fun. But since right now I'm immersed into it, I've developed a passion." Student 7 likewise attributed his emerging interest in a political career to encounters with party leaders.

This two-path pattern qualifies the literature in a useful way. Correa and Rodríguez-Teruel (2026) and McDonnell et al. (2024) argue that youth-wing participation strengthens ambition by exposing members to networks and opportunities; the UNIMA evidence shows that it does so through at least two distinct routes: consolidation for the already-interested and generation for the initially indifferent. Recognising both routes matters for any claim about causal effect: the wings do not simply attract the already-ambitious, but in some cases produce ambition through sustained exposure. Party officials reinforced the developmental reading, describing the wings as spaces for identifying and mentoring future leaders, with some parties operating mechanisms to absorb former wing leaders into national structures after graduation—an arrangement consistent with Bolin et al.'s (2026) account of parties using youth wings to secure future members and leaders.

5.3 Skills, networks, and political attitudes

5.3.1 Skills acquired

Participants consistently reported acquiring a cluster of practical competencies, with communication and public speaking most often cited. Graduate 1 said participation "shapes my public speaking as well as negotiation skills," and Student 1, a publicity secretary, observed that the role itself demanded it: "You can't be a publicity secretary if you fail to express." Beyond communication, participants described gains in confidence, strategic thinking, and the management of people and pressure. Student 4 reported greater confidence in handling public responsibilities; Student 6 said the wing had "sharpened me on how I can lead my fellow students." Graduate 3 described learning to reconcile competing interests:

Team management, but also managing pressure from various stakeholders, but also prioritising interest for various individuals. Because usually people usually have conflicting ideas and interests… politics helped me on how best we could align interest based on each of the various aspirations that we want to achieve.

Lecturer 1 summarised the range as "leadership skills, supervisory skills, management skills… how to lead a group of people, how to manage a group of people and ensure that the objectives of that group are being met." Resilience emerged as a further competence: Graduate 1 illustrated it through a former member who kept pursuing political leadership after losing elections, learning to "adapt to the problem" and remain "resilient enough" to continue.

These competencies map closely onto those Dugan and Komives (2007) identify as outcomes of leadership participation—public speaking, negotiation, strategic planning, conflict resolution, and organisational management—and they were acquired, as Chau (2025) predicts, through practice rather than formal training. Their significance extends beyond politics. Communication, teamwork, negotiation, conflict management, and resilience are transferable to professional and community settings, so participation contributes to broader personal development as well as to specifically political preparation. This transferability strengthens the case for treating campus wings as developmental institutions rather than narrowly partisan ones. The competencies are not, however, intrinsically pro-democratic. The same

negotiation and mobilisation skills that serve constructive leadership also equip members to operate within patronage networks and to organise partisan pressure; in a clientelist setting, learning “how politics works” includes learning how resource exchange and factional loyalty work (Mugume and Luescher 2017). What participants reported acquiring is best understood as political capability in a broad sense, which can be turned to democratic or to clientelist ends depending on the incentives the surrounding party system supplies.

5.3.2 Networks and social capital

Networking recurred as one of the most valued outcomes of participation. Lecturer 3 observed that “most people who were in party wings, they are doing well outside because of the connection which they built while they were here.” Participants described forming relationships with party officials, ministers, members of parliament, and councillors—relationships otherwise inaccessible to students. Several alumni reported that these ties persisted after graduation and supported continued involvement in party structures, and Political Leader 4 noted that former wing leaders are often absorbed into national party bodies.

These accounts support Barkan’s (2004) argument that universities supply future elites with networks, visibility, and organisational experience, and they fit the civic voluntarism model’s emphasis on recruitment networks as a driver of participation (Alscher et al. 2025; Verba et al. 1995): people engage when connected to networks that offer encouragement, information, and opportunity. The relationships participants described constitute social capital, defined as resources embedded in and accessible through networks (van Bakel and Horak 2024), that can yield mentorship, information, and continued political involvement well beyond graduation. That this social capital flows through the parent-party linkage again reflects the wings’ dual character: the same upward connection that subordinates them to party agendas is what gives members access to consequential political actors.

5.3.3 Democratic attitudes and civic values

Participation also shaped political dispositions. Lecturer 3 emphasised the wings’ role in cultivating tolerance and the acceptance of defeat:

You learn how to relate. You learn how to accept defeat… You learn how to understand other people’s side… You are able to interact with people of different political orientations without problems.

Student 5 made the same point about cross-party coexistence, arguing that supporting different parties does not mean students should hate one another, and described using wing activity to practise accountability by "questioning our fellow wings on campus." Through meetings, debates, and campaigns conducted alongside members of rival parties, students learn that disagreement need not become hostility, an appreciation of pluralism that Almond and Verba (1963) identify as foundational to a functioning democracy, in which citizens engage opponents while remaining committed to shared democratic principles.

The acceptance of electoral outcomes is a particularly consequential lesson. Learning to lose, and to continue participating peacefully after losing, is a marker of political maturity directly relevant to leadership. Understood through the socialisation framework (Easton and Dennis 1969), the wings act as agents that transmit democratic practice through repeated interaction across political difference. This finding carries weight in the Malawian context, where political intolerance and partisan division are recurring concerns: by fostering dialogue, tolerance, and respect for electoral results, campus wings may help cultivate leaders better disposed to constructive participation in national democratic life.

This reading should not be overstated, and it sits in tension with the wider evidence on African party youth structures. The same organisations that participants credited with teaching tolerance are, in the regional literature, also implicated in clientelism and electoral intimidation through party cadres (Bob-Milliar 2014; Mugume and Luescher 2017). Two considerations bear on how to reconcile this. First, the democratic dispositions reported here are espoused values elicited in interviews, and participants had little incentive to volunteer that their wings also served coercive or patronage functions; the account is therefore likely to tilt toward the constructive. Second, socialisation transmits whatever the surrounding institution practises, so a wing can plausibly teach cross-party civility on campus while also drawing members into partisan resource networks—the two are not mutually exclusive. The defensible claim is the narrower one: participation exposes students to democratic practices and can cultivate democratic dispositions, but whether those dispositions or their clientelist counterparts predominate is contingent on the conduct of the parent party and cannot be settled by self-report alone. The consistency of the tolerance accounts across students, alumni, and lecturers gives the positive finding credibility; the absence of corroborating observation, and the known regional pattern, set its limits.

5.4 Constraints on the developmental role

The wings' developmental contribution is real but conditional. Three constraints recurred across the interviews, and each follows from the institutional position established earlier.

5.4.1 Funding

Financial constraint was the most frequently cited problem. Wings depend on parent-party support that is often inadequate, delayed, or unreliable. Student 2 explained the dependence directly: "We depend on the party officials just to have their hands on our activities financially because we do not have reliable sources on how to resource ma funds." Student 4 described the practical effect on programming: "We have our calendar of events, we want to do A, B, C, D, but out of A, B, C, D, then it's only A that is being fulfilled." Students 5 and 6 confirmed funding as the central obstacle. Because the wings lack independent income, their activity rises and falls with the parent party's willingness and capacity to pay—and Student 2 noted that support thinned further once his party moved into opposition.

This dependence is the direct cost of the upward linkage that otherwise supplies access and networks. The civic voluntarism model holds that participation requires resources as well as motivation (Verba et al. 1995); where resources contract, opportunities for the leadership events, outreach, and political

education that generate developmental benefit contract with them. The constraint matches McDonnell et al.'s (2024) observation that youth wings are expected to mobilise and recruit without always receiving the means to do so. In effect, funding scarcity converts the wings' dependence on their parties from an asset into a liability, capping the very developmental work that justifies supporting them.

5.4.2 Academic–political balance

Participants acknowledged real tension between political activity and coursework. One reflected that "even my GPA… [was] so much down by the time I was like a president." Lecturer 1 recalled a student missing an assignment deadline because of campaign work, and Political Leader 1 warned that some students "get carried away with politics and forget about their studies." The demands are heaviest for office holders, who must coordinate members and manage activities alongside their studies, and they peak during examinations and around deadlines. The pattern is consistent with Dushmantha and Gamage (2021), who found that political involvement reduced academic performance in a Sri Lankan university, and with the broader extracurricular literature showing that participation aids personal growth while competing for students' time (Dugan and Komives 2007).

The evidence does not, however, support a claim of inherent incompatibility. Lecturer 3 noted that some students sustain strong academic performance while remaining politically active, which locates the difficulty not in participation as such but in time management and prioritisation. The tension is therefore a manageable constraint rather than a disqualifying one—but managing it is itself a demand the wings place on members, and one that institutional recognition (discussed next) could ease by legitimising and scheduling activity rather than forcing it into the margins of the academic calendar.

5.4.3 Institutional non-recognition

The university's lack of formal recognition was the third recurring constraint, and the one most directly within institutional control. Without recognition, wings cannot organise openly. Student 5 captured the resulting irregularity: "It's like an illegal thing we just do because we want to get involved in it, but it's not recognized by the universities… in terms of booking a place, we try to book in other names." Student 6 reported being pushed off campus entirely, having to "find places outside campus" to meet. Non-recognition is thus not only a logistical inconvenience but a question of standing: it denies the wings legitimacy, makes recruitment and event organisation harder, and reduces their visibility to the wider student body.

The consequence is a partial suppression of the developmental benefits the study documents. If wings are agents of political socialisation (Easton and Dennis 1969) and sites where universities might cultivate future leaders (Barkan 2004), then restrictions on their operation curtail precisely the socialising activity that produces value. The finding surfaces a broader tension between maintaining an orderly academic environment and accommodating legitimate political participation. The accounts here suggest that suppression is not the only available response: a recognised, regulated framework could preserve order while allowing the wings to perform their developmental function openly rather than informally and off-campus.

6 Conclusion and implications

This study asked how participation in university political party wings shapes the formation of future political leaders at UNIMA. The answer is that the wings function as agents of political socialisation whose developmental contribution is genuine but institutionally conditional. They operate as formally constituted organisations with elected executives that mirror national party structures, and they remain tied upward to their parent parties, a position that makes them bridges between campus and national politics rather than autonomous student clubs. That position is the source of both their value and their fragility.

Three substantive conclusions follow from the evidence. First, on organisation: the wings expose students to representation, accountability, and management through direct office-holding, giving them practical political experience that observation alone could not. Second, on ambition: participation works through two distinct routes, consolidating prior interest for some members and generating new ambition for others, which means the wings do more than recruit the already-committed: they can produce political aspiration through sustained exposure. Third, on skills and dispositions: members acquire transferable competencies in communication, negotiation, conflict management, and resilience; build social capital that persists beyond graduation; and report democratic dispositions, notably tolerance across party lines and acceptance of electoral defeat, that matter for leadership in a setting where political intolerance is a recurring concern.

These conclusions should be read together with a fourth: the socialisation the wings perform is double-edged. Because the wings are embedded in a clientelist party system, the same processes that build organisational skill and democratic disposition also draw students into patronage networks and partisan mobilisation, and the regional literature on party cadres documents how readily campus structures of this kind shade into coercion (Bob-Milliar 2014; Mugume and Luescher 2017). The democratic dispositions reported here are, moreover, self-reported and uncorroborated by observation. The study therefore does not claim that campus wings are unambiguously beneficial; it claims that they are consequential agents of political socialisation whose output—democratic or clientelist—depends on the conduct of the parent party and the institutional frame the university provides.

These benefits are checked by three constraints that share a common root in the wings' institutional position. Dependence on parent-party funding makes activity unreliable; the demands of political office compete with coursework; and the absence of university recognition forces wing activity into informal, off-campus arrangements. The developmental promise the study documents is therefore not self-executing: it depends on resource and recognition decisions taken by parties and universities, not on student motivation alone. The central implication is that campus wings should be treated as developmental institutions worth supporting and regulating rather than as peripheral student groups to be tolerated or suppressed. The recommendations below follow directly from the constraints identified.

6.1 Recommendations

For political parties, more regular and reliable financial support would allow wings to deliver the leadership training, political education, and outreach that generate developmental value, and transparent funding mechanisms would reduce the disruption participants described. Parties should also formalise mentorship, creating structured opportunities for wing members to engage experienced politicians, since the evidence shows that such contact is where much of the leadership learning occurs. Because student politics in the region tends to reproduce patriarchal patterns of access (Makura and Omodan 2024), parties should pair this support with deliberate measures to include women, such as mentorship aimed at female members and steps to open the senior executive roles that women are typically routed away from, so that the developmental benefits of participation are not confined to men.

For the University of Malawi, a clear policy framework recognising and regulating campus wings would resolve the most tractable of the three constraints. Such a framework should set out the rights and responsibilities of wings and procedures for organising activities. Given the documented risk that campus party structures become vehicles for clientelism and intimidation, the framework should aim higher than keeping participation "peaceful": it should actively mitigate clientelist and exclusionary practices, for example by requiring transparent wing elections and finances, prohibiting the use of students as partisan enforcers, and protecting members who decline to take part in mobilisation. Recognition on these terms would let wings book venues, recruit, and hold events openly while reducing the scope for the coercive practices that threaten both students and the university's academic mission, and a balanced approach that protects academic performance alongside political participation would strengthen the university's role in forming responsible future leaders.

For the wings themselves, developing independent fundraising and stronger internal planning would reduce dependence on irregular party support, and a deliberate emphasis on democratic values (tolerance, accountability, and respect for political difference) would consolidate the civic dispositions the study found. For student members, the evidence that some peers combine political activity with academic success indicates that the academic–political tension is manageable through time management and prioritisation, particularly around examinations and deadlines.

6.2 Areas for further research

Five extensions would sharpen the findings. A comparison of wing members with non-members would help isolate the developmental effect of participation from prior disposition. A multi-institution study across Malawian universities would test how far the UNIMA pattern travels. A longitudinal study of graduates' trajectories would establish whether wing membership predicts later leadership in parties, public institutions, or civil society. A gender-focused study would examine whether men and women experience participation, leadership access, and ambition formation differently; the regional scholarship on the "politics of process" that marginalises women in university leadership (Makura and Omodan 2024) offers a ready framework for situating such an inquiry within established structural barriers rather than treating gender as an afterthought. Finally, research is needed on the digital dimension of campus politics: where universities restrict on-campus activity, social media may become a primary site of mobilisation, recruitment, and contact with leaders (Winyi et al. 2023), and examining this informal

space would capture a dimension the present interview-based study could not. A further line of work might probe directly the clientelist and coercive functions that participants in a study of this design had little incentive to disclose, using observational or less reactive methods to test the more optimistic, self-reported picture against behaviour.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Department of Politics and Government, University of Malawi, prior to data collection. The research was conducted in accordance with recognised standards for research involving human participants.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were free to decline any question or withdraw at any time.

Consent for publication

Participants consented to the use of their anonymised responses, including verbatim quotations, in academic publications. No individual is identifiable from the data presented.

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Author Contribution

A.B. conducted the data collection and prepared the original dissertation draft from which the manuscript was developed. E.P. supervised the dissertation, contributed to the conceptualisation and structuring of the study, and assisted in converting the dissertation into a manuscript for journal submission. A.B. and E.P. reviewed and approved the final manuscript for submission.

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During preparation, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) and Grammarly only to improve clarity, grammar, and readability. The tools did not generate content, analyse data, or produce findings. The authors reviewed all output and take full responsibility for the manuscript.

Data Availability

The interview data generated and analysed during this study are not publicly available in order to protect participant confidentiality, given the politically sensitive nature of the study and the small, identifiable participant population. Anonymised excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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