



EDUCATION, POLICY, AND POLITICS: EXAMINING THE LINK BETWEEN FREE SHS AND YOUTH VOTING PATTERNS IN GHANA

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Abstract: The introduction of the FSHS policy has been pivotal in shifting the educational landscape for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Through a comprehensive analysis of student feedback, the research identifies that a significant portion of students perceive the policy as a breakthrough, facilitating not only their academic engagement but also participation in extracurricular activities. However, the study also uncovers persistent concerns regarding the policy's sustainability, with issues such as overcrowded classrooms and unequal distribution of resources raising questions about the long-term viability of the initiative. Furthermore, the findings reveal that students' perceptions of the FSHS policy significantly influence their political affiliations, with many expressing supports for the ruling party due to the perceived benefits of the policy. Conversely, a notable segment of students remains skeptical, suggesting that the policy is politically motivated than genuinely aimed at addressing systemic educational challenges. The study underscores the importance of ongoing evaluation and reform to ensure the FSHS policy meets its intended goals of improving educational access and quality while maintaining equitable resource allocation. The implications of these findings contribute to the broader discourse on education policy and its intersection with political dynamics in Ghana.

Keywords: Educational Policy, Free Senior High School Policy, Free Senior High School, Free Education.

Introduction

The expansion of a country is closely linked to the quality of its workforce, which is heavily influenced by equitable access to education (Saleh et al., 2020). In Ghana, disparities in educational access between the affluent southern regions and the poorer northern areas have persisted, undermining efforts to reduce poverty (Molini & Paci, 2015; Songsore, 2009; Entrich, 2021). The introduction of the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE) program in 1996 initially improved enrollment rates, yet secondary school access remained low, particularly for students from impoverished backgrounds (Ministry of Education, 2017). To address these challenges, President Nana Akufo-Addo proposed the Free Senior High School Education Policy in 2016, which is the improvement of the Progressively Free Senior High School Education (PFSHSE) Policy, aimed at alleviating financial burdens for families (Mohammed et al., 2021). While some critics raised concerns about the

sustainability and quality of education under this policy (IMANI, 2018; McConnell, 2010), supporters argue it is crucial for poverty reduction and skill development essential for Ghana's economic growth (Essuman, 2012). As the 2024 elections approach, this study aims to gauge student opinions on the Free SHS initiative and its impact on their educational experiences.

The research seeks to achieve these questions.

1. What are UGBS students' perception of the Free Senior High School (SHS) policy?
2. What role does the perception of the FSHS policy play in shaping students' support for political candidates?

Literature Review

Research on the impact of the free Senior High School (SHS) policy, implemented in Ghana in 2017, on university students' voting preferences is notably limited. This policy is lauded for enhancing education, reducing poverty, ensuring equitable access, and fostering economic development. The present study aims to study how these benefits influence students' political party support, potentially affecting electoral outcomes. The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Article 13(2b)) mandates that secondary education should gradually become accessible to all, yet few African nations have fully realized this goal. Lewin (2011) notes that African policymaking often overlooks secondary education in favor of primary or tertiary levels, calling for national planning to prioritize funding for secondary education to ease the transition from primary to secondary levels. The Sustainable Development Goals emphasize achieving universal access to equitable and quality education by 2030. However, Bregman and Stallmeister (2002) argue that limited economic resources impede access to secondary education across the continent. Lewin and Caillods (2001) assert that increasing and improving budget efficiency is crucial for making secondary education accessible and affordable. Countries such as Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania have explored free secondary education with mixed results. Uganda's implementation of free secondary education in 2007 led to significant enrollment increases, particularly among females, rising from 412,367 in 2007 to 1,194,000 by 2010 (Kakuba et al., 2021; Stasavage, 2005). In Kenya, the 2008 policy primarily subsidized tuition, resulting in increased enrollment but leaving families to cover other costs (Mutegi et al., 2017; Ohba, 2011). Meanwhile, Tanzania's abolition of fees for secondary education resulted in increased enrollment but also faced challenges of underfunding and resource strain (Linde, 2014; Godda, 2018).

Election Competition

Political parties often face pressure to implement social policies in order to secure electoral success, a dynamic which can benefit citizens by ensuring politicians prioritize improving living standards (Post, 2019). This necessitates an examination of how electoral competition drives government action on social policies (Nelson, 2007). Africa's emerging democracies, including Ghana, provide a platform for political parties to engage in electoral competition, frequently centering on key issues like education during campaigns to gain public support (Harding & Stasavage, 2014; Harding, 2020). Promises such as free education are often used to sway voters (Budge & Farlie, 1983), prompting politicians to focus spending on critical areas like education (Le & Nguyen, 2021). Jakobi (2011) observes that such policies not only benefit recipients but also help parties maintain long-term political power. In Ghana, where democracy is maturing, electoral competition is a significant aspect of elections. Public officials, whether elected or appointed, play a crucial role in shaping public policy and the political environment (Ayee, 2011). However, while some campaign promises are feasible, they may not always align with voters' priorities once the party assumes power (Lindberg, 2010). Political manifestoes often provide multiple policy options for voters, thus shaping the national agenda, and it is the responsibility of political parties to fulfill their electoral promises.

Regime Effect

The government or regime type affects the way power is gained and used. Wigley and Akkoyunlu-Wigley (2011) found that political leaders are limited to the kind of regime that they operate run by their constitutions. In a more democratic system, there is always a long-term goal by the country to provide interventionist policies such as education while in a regime which is authoritative may not consider that as a priority since democracy aims to meet the responses and needs of the people (Huntington, 1984). In the case of Africa where democracy is spreading, elections is a very important feature that citizens look up for (Ubi & Ibonye, 2019) and electorates see social policies as very vital part of their lives with linkage to democracy (Kuenzi & Lambright, 2010). This concludes that countries with better and advanced democracies enjoy lots of social policies program than that of developing democracy (Flora & Alber, 2017). Just because a government is authoritarian or democratic does not necessarily influence how resources are shared to meet the needs of the people (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007; Przeworski et al., 1996). Peiffer (2012) argues that Africa's social policies are not motivated by democracy though other non-democratic countries still give social support. This is because external pressures force these African countries to adopt changes in their political system supporting the argument that democracy is not the only reason countries guarantee social services drawing the conclusion that not all political leaders are motivated to implement such policies due to electoral incentives (Carbone, 2012).

Ideological Lineage

Left-wing parties advocate for social policies that benefit the population by reducing social inequality and promoting civil rights, such as the right to education, often allocating substantial resources to education and social services (Sinwell, 2012; Ha, 2012). In the 1970s, many Latin American countries successfully implemented social policies that helped the majority (Cecchini & Martínez, 2012), and left-wing parties are generally seen to positively influence such policies (Jensen, 2012). However, right-wing parties in both Latin America (Huber & Stephens, 2012) and post-communist Europe (Tavits & Letki, 2009) have also enacted social policies, highlighting that social policy development is not solely a left-wing endeavor. While debates about political ideologies persist, global development goals, such as universal secondary education outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 4), often shape policy execution more than party ideology (Tawiah & Karungi, 2020; Simmons & Elkins, 2004). Additionally, social policies evolve in response to changing financial conditions, demographics, and societal structures, necessitating increased investments in education as youth populations grow (Cristea et al., 2020; Estes, 2020). This demographic shift emphasizes the importance of secondary education for accessing higher education, though rising enrollment can create educational challenges that countries address through measures like tuition waivers (Jaremus et al., 2023; Adarkwah, 2022; Duah et al., 2023).

Theoretical foundation

David Easton's theory of political support provides a framework to understand how citizens engage with and support political leaders and policies (Easton, 1975). It distinguishes between diffuse support, which reflects long-term confidence in the political system, and specific support, which is contingent on the perceived effectiveness of policies and leaders. In applying this theory, if students perceive the FSHS policy as effective in increasing educational access and alleviating financial barriers, their specific support for the governing party will increase. This could lead to a broader diffuse support for the political system, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the government.

Methodology

The study utilized qualitative method using purposive sampling to select 33 level 400 students from the University of Ghana Business School, focusing on those who experienced the phased implementation of the Free Senior

High School (FSHS) policy in 2017. A structured interview guide was developed and validated through discussions with colleagues and recommendations from a qualitative research expert. Pre-testing of the guide ensured consistency with the study's objectives, confirming that the questions were relevant to the participants' backgrounds. The interviews explored students' awareness, perceptions of the FSHS policy, and its influence on their electoral preferences ahead of the 2024 elections. One-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted, and the primary data which was the interviews were thematically analyzed using NVivo 11 software. Ethical standards, including informed consent, participant confidentiality, and anonymity, were upheld throughout the study.

Results

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	15	45
Female	18	55
Age		
18-20 years	2	6
Above 20 years	31	94
Academic Program		
Finance	8	24
Accounting	9	27
Operations and Management Information Systems (OMIS)	8	24
Public Administration and Health Services Management (PAHSM)	4	12
Organization and Human Resource Management (OHRM)	4	12
Total Participants	33	100

The study included a total of 33 participants, comprised of 15 males (45%) and 18 females (55%). In terms of age, 2 participants (6%) were between 18-20 years old, while 31 participants (94%) were above 20 years. The academic programs represented were Finance (8 participants, 24%), Accounting (9 participants, 27%), Operations and Management Information Systems (OMIS) (8 participants, 24%), Public Administration and Health Services Management (PAHSM) (4 participants, 12%), and Organization and Human Resource Management (OHRM) (4 participants, 12%).

Table 1: Themes Generated from the Analysis

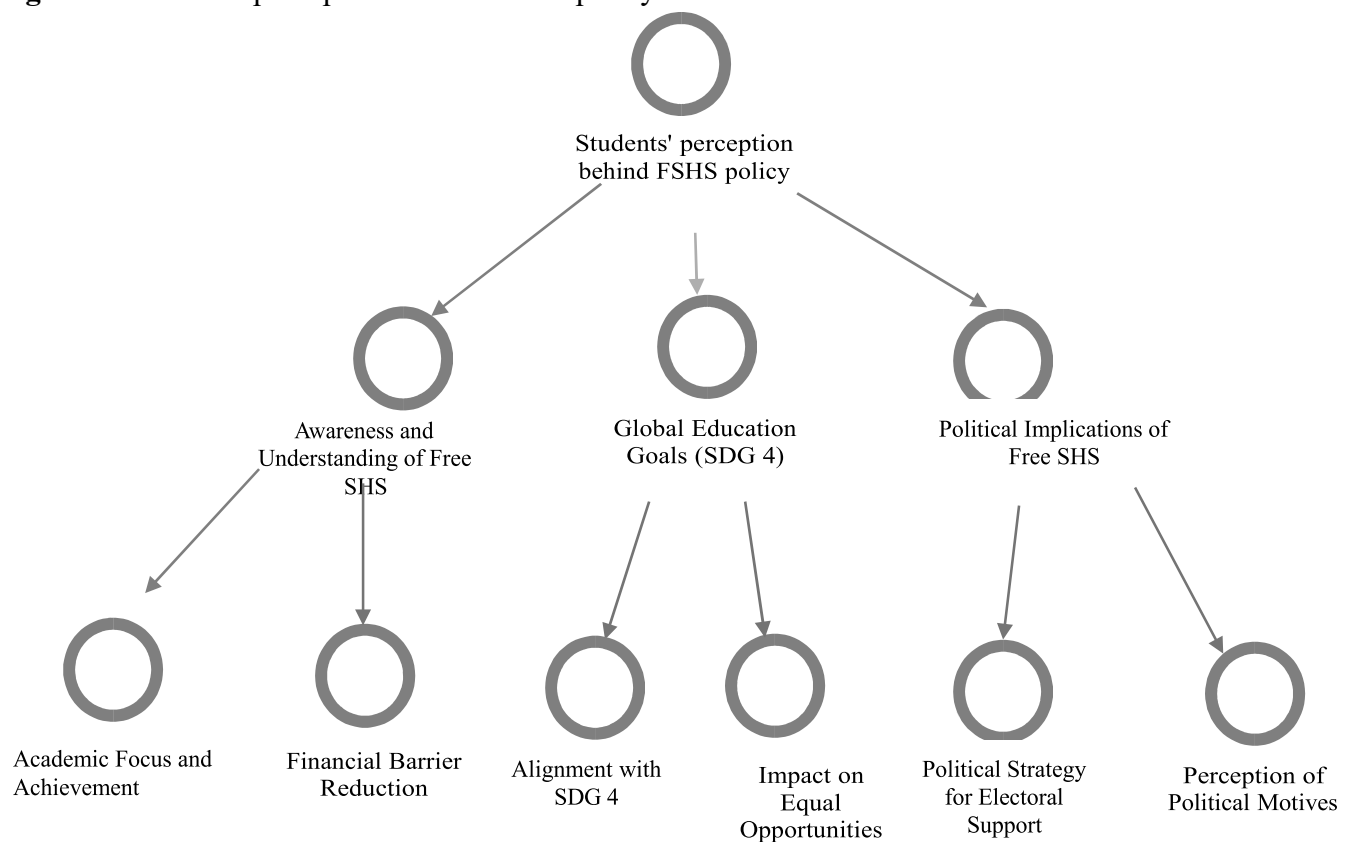
Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Emerging Theme
Awareness of Free SHS Policy	Reasons for Free SHS	Seen as breaking financial barriers and increasing access to secondary education.
Political Support for FSHS	Support for NPP	NPP supporters cite benefits of FSHS on education and commitment to reform.
Opposition to FSHS	Support for NDC	NDC supporters highlight gaps in FSHS and promise for broader educational reforms.
Neutral Stance on Politics	Indecision Between NPP and NDC	Undecided students evaluate both parties' education plans.

Impact on Academic Achievement	Improved Focus	FSHS reduces financial stress, enhancing academic performance.
FSHS and Global Education Goals (SDG 4)	SDG Contribution 4	FSHS seen as promoting equal educational opportunities in line with SDG 4.
FSHS as Political Strategy	Electoral Influence	Viewed as a tactic to gain voter support.
Concerns About FSHS	Quality and Equity	Issues with overcrowded classrooms, sustainability, and unequal access to quality.

The study identifies three primary themes based on the research objectives during the analysis stage. They include: i) What are UGBS students' awareness and understanding of the Free Senior High School (SHS) policy? ii) What are UGBS student's perception on the current government concerning the FSHS?

To assess UGBS students' perception behind Free Senior High School (SHS) policy

Figure 1: Students' perception behind FSHS policy



When students were asked whether they are aware and understood the reasons for the Free Senior High School. The interviewees (25 out of 33 representing 76%) noted that the aim of the FSHS was to break financial barriers and to support families to help their wards to enroll in the secondary school. An accounting students shared positive impact of the FSHS policy on academic focus and achievement.

"The Free SHS policy has been very instrumental in my quest towards pursuing university education. By the government's waiver of fees for Senior High School in the year 2017 I think, it enabled me to concentrate on my studies and extracurricular activities, devoid of thoughts about tuition at the SHS level. This support enabled me

to get good grades which is 6As in my WASSCE exams since these thoughts of school fees and other needs can make you lose concentration sometimes and now with FSHS, I will be a graduate from University of Ghana in some few months (Interview with accounting student, 2024).

Another accounting student agrees to its impact on their educational journey.

"The Free SHS policy came just in time to clear school fees from the list of expenses I was to bear to attend senior high school. This policy made possible what would have remained closed because of financial constraints and the policy did not bring education closer to my doorstep but created an enabling environment for me to do my best which enabled me to study business in SHS and now I am doing Accounting in University of Ghana Business School (Interview with accounting student, 2024).

Again, some respondents (18 out of 33 representing 56%) were of the view that, the FSHS needs to be implemented because it is a global goal set for governments especially in developing countries for second cycle school to be free based on the SDG 4.

An Accounting student observed:

It's just fantastic how the Free SHS policy dovetails into SDG Goal 4. It is not about providing an opportunity for everyone to go to school but those very financial barriers that have prevented so many young people from continuing their education are crumbling. I can see personally how this policy is genuinely helping students from less well-off families to get equal opportunities with others who could afford school fees and It's really just a global commitment to making sure that education is a right and not a privilege, really making a difference here (Interview with accounting student, 2024).

Some of the students interviewed (15 out of 33 representing 45%) saw this as a political strategy in view of influencing electoral support affecting their political preference at the long run.

From where I stand, the Free Senior High School policy would be an implement of the New Patriotic Party to patronize political power. Clearly, free education is big news, but at the same time, it is worth noting that such kind of policy could be strategic in appealing to voters. I can't help thinking that this is partly about winning elections and strengthening their political position (Interview with OHRM student, 2024).

Furthermore, the interviewer asks some of the negative experiences concerning the FSHS (27 out of 33 respondents representing 81%) talked about quality education, sustainability of the policy, political motives perception and unequal access to quality education.

An OMIS student was concerned about quality of education through the FSHS.

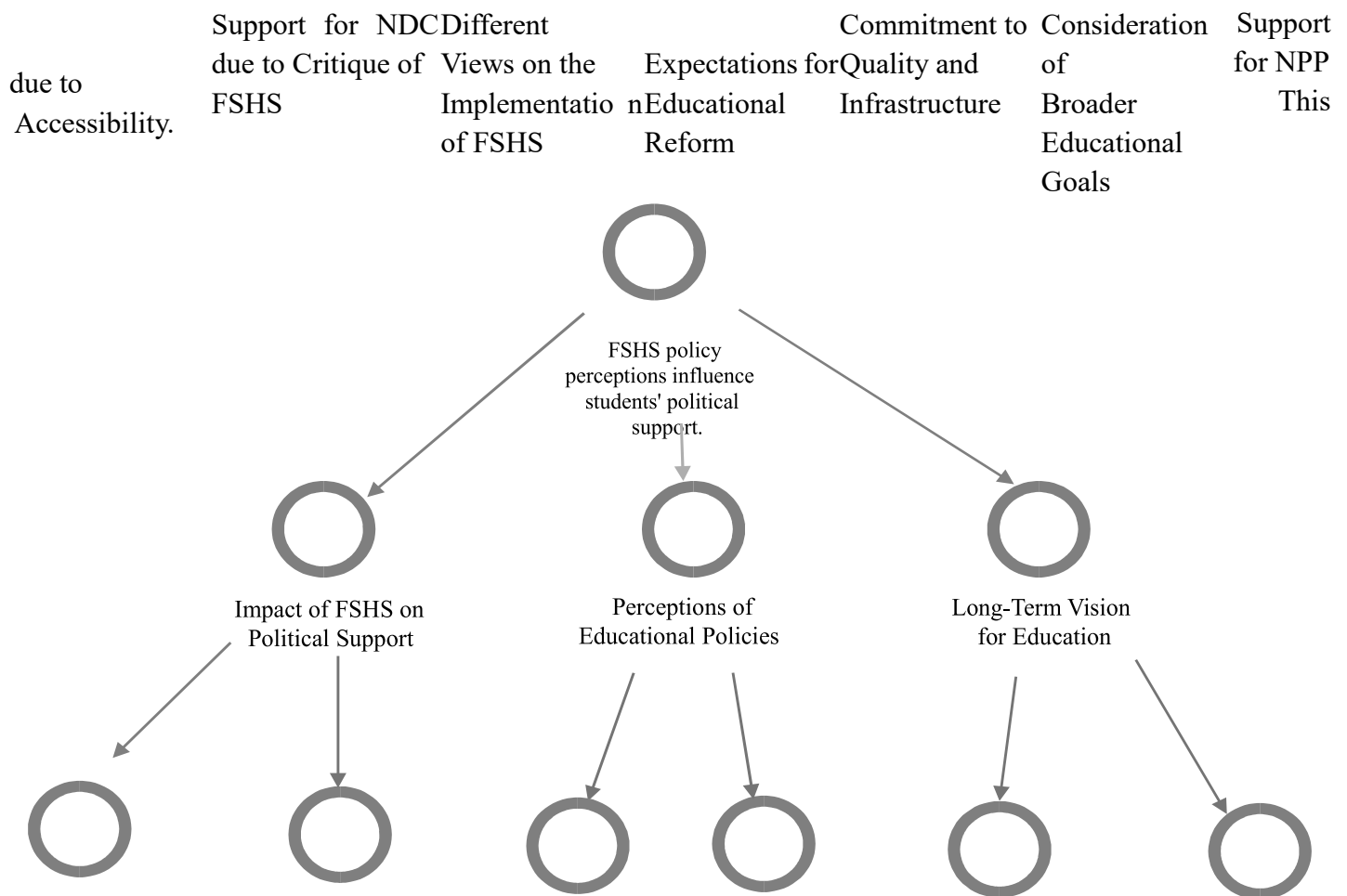
The Free SHS policy might have widened the gates of learning to many, but it has come at a cost: the quality of education. While the policy might be good since more students are now in school, the resources to hold such an influx are not be there, and therefore the education attained will not stand in place of what it should be. There are a lot of students crowded in the classroom, an indication of teachers whose work is overstretched (Interview with OHRM student, 2024).

Another OMIS student was doubting about the sustainability of the FSHS in the long run.

That is a very wonderful idea of free education. But how far can this kind of policy be adhered to? With the current economic situation, it's hard to tell whether the government is going to be able to keep funding it properly. Will we see a drop in the quality of our education or even start paying fees again if they run out of money? (Interview with OHRM student, 2024).

The perception of the FSHS policy plays a significant role in shaping students' support for political candidates.

Figure 2: FSHS policy perceptions influence students' political support.



discussion explores how students' views on the FSHS policy affect their support for political candidates, particularly contrasting the NPP, which introduced the policy, with the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC). 20 out of 33 people representing 60.6% was of the view that they will support the New Patriotic Party for their efforts of implementing the FSHS since it has benefitted them and their families through its accessibility. A PAHS student said that the party took bold decision to implement such a difficult policy:

I support the NPP, bearing in mind that their FSHS policy is one further bold step taken by that party in the right direction. They have taken concrete steps toward making education more accessible, and that means that some of their promises are being concretized. One such example is that a policy for them shows strong interest in education, and it is perhaps for this reason that I would seem to be influenced to support them (Interview with PAHS student, 2024).

Lastly, a PAHSM student said she will vote for the NPP because they have a long-term vision for improving education in Ghana and want to vote for them for more educational opportunities for the youth of Ghana.

I am tempted to support the NPP, as this policy sums up their larger vision for education in Ghana. Having shown seriousness over the future by providing free secondary education, it is in line with my conviction that any progress in education in a sustainable way requires bold policies and long-term planning. Though not without its challenges, this initiative of the NPP gives me hope that improvement in education would continue (Interview with PAHs student, 2024).

Again, 9 out of 33 students representing 27.2% were of the view that they will support the opposition in the upcoming elections.

For instance, a student thinks that the policy is poorly implemented and believes that NDC has a better educational reform plan.

My support for the NDC comes from the critique of FSHS policy and also their alternative proposals. As much as it was the introduction of the policy by the NPP, I have been privy to reasons why the execution is bad and does not resolve the fundamental issues in education. In effect, what the NDC says—that they will come with a more robust education reform plan—addresses that shortcoming (Interview with Finance student, 2024).

Lastly, 4 out of 33 students representing 12.1% are neutral about their stance whether to support the NPP or NDC. An OHRM respondent was undecided supporting either party because they want to use them as manifestoes to judge each party and decide about voting for either of them.

Presently, I am indecisive as to whether to support the NPP or the NDC because, as it were, my interest is more in the implementation of the FSHS policy than in which party is behind it. As much as the policy of the NPP has expanded access to education, there have been complaints about how it is being implemented. On the other hand, there are aspects that have the prospect of offering something better in terms of reformist proposals from the NDC. I would like to know which of the parties comes up with a better plan for addressing the implementation challenges that confront the policy (Interview with OHRM student, 2024).

Discussion

To assess UGBS students' perception behind Free Senior High School (SHS) policy

Student feedback on the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy highlights its perceived success in alleviating financial barriers to education, with 76% recognizing it as a breakthrough (Jacob & Lehner, 2011; Asankha & Takashi, 2011). Many reported that the policy allowed them to focus on academics and extracurricular activities without tuition burdens, contributing to improved academic performance, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4's emphasis on equitable education (UN, 2015). However, 45% of students viewed the policy as a political strategy to gain votes for the ruling party, as its announcement coincided with election campaigns, indicating that social policies can shape voter preferences (Le & Nguyen, 2021; Ayee, 2011). Concerns regarding the policy's sustainability were also prevalent, with students citing overcrowded classrooms, declining educational quality, and unequal resource allocation, reflecting issues seen in other countries with free education initiatives (Brudevold-Newman, 2017; Otieno & Colclough, 2009). Godda (2018) noted that despite the policy's intentions for universal access, unequal access to quality education remains a challenge, highlighting persistent disparities in educational quality (Linde, 2014; Kakuba et al., 2021).

The perception of the FSHS policy plays a significant role in shaping students' support for political candidates. The effect of the FSHS policy on students' political support reflects broader trends in the ways in which social policies intersect with regime types and electoral strategies. Indeed, as suggested by both Post (2019) and Nelson (2007), many political parties use social policies just like the FSHS to win votes, especially in competitive democracies where education is a salient policy issue

(Harding & Stasavage, 2014; Budge & Dennis Farlie, 1983). The FSHS policy of Ghana's New Patriotic Party thus is in tune with the perspective of democratic regimes supporting long-term social policies in keeping with expectations from the electorates (Wigley & Akkoyunlu-Wigley, 2011; Huntington, 1984). This is evidenced in the student's support for the NPP, where 60.6 percent would vote for this party because these educational reforms within their minds are a big deal toward ensuring access to education and hence align with broader development goals globally taken into perspective (Easton, 1975). On the other hand, some students doubt the implementation of the policy and how it addresses deeper systemic needs, a view rhyming with the reservations over politically motivated policies (Sinwell, 2012; Jensen, 2012). In fact, 27.2% of the students believe that the opposition party, NDC, had a more holistic education reform agenda which tackled problems not fully resolved by the FSHS policy.

This belief in greater comprehensiveness is supported by literature on the relationship between political parties and social policy formulation and implementation. Thus, according to Huber and Stephens (2012) and Simmons and Elkins (2004), socialist or left-wing parties are generally inclined toward increasing social entitlements and ensuring equity in public goods provision. That critique puts into perspective the larger challenge of making sure policies not only promise but deliver on the improvements in quality and equity, as caught by Easton's Theory of Political Support, that effective policy implementation is at the core of public perception and electoral behavior (Easton, 1975).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Free Senior High School (FSHS) policy in Ghana represents a significant step toward eliminating financial barriers to education, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals aimed at promoting equitable quality education. While positive student experiences, such as participation in extracurricular activities and improved academic performance, are promising indicators, concerns about the policy's quality and sustainability remain, including overcrowded classrooms and uneven resource distribution. The perception of the FSHS policy also affects students' political affiliations, as it has solidified support for the ruling party while leaving some students skeptical about its capacity to address deeper systemic issues. Future research should focus on the long-term impacts of the FSHS policy on educational outcomes and political dynamics, examining resource allocation, teacher training, and infrastructure development over time to better understand its effects on students' academic and career paths.

Recommendations

Policymakers should prioritize equitable resource allocation and improve infrastructure to address overcrowding and ensure the sustainability of the FSHS policy. Additionally, ongoing assessments of the policy's effectiveness should be conducted to identify areas for reform and adapt strategies that align educational outcomes with the evolving needs of students.

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