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Exploring Political Neutrality and Disengagement: The Experiences of Jehovah's Witness Students in Educational Settings

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ABSTRACT

Schools are tasked with instilling civic and social responsibility values, and such means are achieved through political activities. However, for Jehovah's Witness (JW) students, participation in such activities can conflict with their religious convictions, presenting a unique challenge as they navigate educational expectations while striving to uphold their beliefs. Hence, this study explores the experiences of JW students regarding their political neutrality and disengagement in educational settings. Utilizing qualitative interviews and document analysis, the research identifies the political activities and challenges JW students face and the coping mechanisms they employ to reconcile their religious commitments with political expectations. Findings reveal that nationalistic ceremonies, student government elections, partisanship, and military-related activities significantly affect JW students' faith. Consequently, they face challenges that lead to psychological distress, peer pressure, academic strain, social stigmatization, and verbal bullying. The study further discusses how Merton's Strain Theory elucidates the coping strategies utilized by these students, including silent observation, respectful withdrawal, and, to some extent, conformity. Overall, this research suggests the necessity for schools to foster an inclusive atmosphere that respects diverse beliefs, addressing the implications of social stigmatization on students' mental and emotional well-being.

Keywords: *Jehovah's Witnesses, Political Neutrality, Educational Experience, Religion, Strain Theory*

INTRODUCTION

In modern educational systems, political engagement is seen as a fundamental component of students' development. Various literature presents that schools promoting political and civic engagements are more likely to produce engaged and well-informed citizens (Timreck & Emmons, 2025; Lynggaard & Boje, 2025; Print & Coleman, 2003; Torney-Purta,

2002; Putnam, 2000; Saha, 2000) as well as developed citizens' social and human capital (Benyamina, 2024; Saha & Print, 2009). Schools develop this growth by exposing students to activities that instill civic and social responsibility values, including participation in student governments, school elections, and patriotic ceremonies.

In the Philippine context, the government's commitment to promoting civic and political engagement is rooted in the 1987 Constitution. Article II, Section 13, and Article XIV, Section 3(2) mandate the State to inculcate patriotism and nationalism. In line with these provisions, the Department of Education (DepEd) and Commission on Higher Education (CHED) are tasked with integrating civic education into both curriculum and extra-curricular activities that promote active citizenship, while schools are responsible for implementing these directives (Hernando-Malipot, 2022; CHED, 2018).

These efforts have yielded some outcomes, as indicated by studies such as Castillo et al. (2021), which affirmed that civic and political-related activities help cultivate democratic values and active citizenship. Similarly, Alcazaren (2022) provided the impact of teacher-student interaction on enhancing political participation and strengthening citizenship education. While Mahilum et al. (2025) suggest that civic education plays a vital role in shaping students' civic literacy, as evidenced by the levels of personal responsibility, civic responsibility, and leadership efficacy.

These initiatives reflect the broader expectation that students should learn to engage in the political life of their communities. However, while most students participate in these activities as an extension of their civic responsibility, some students face unique challenges in balancing their personal beliefs with these expectations.

Jehovah's Witnesses (JW), a Christian denomination known for its distinct stance on political neutrality and disengagement, present a notable case. Grounded in their interpretation of biblical teachings, JW adheres to a strict abstention from political affairs, such as refraining from voting and pledging allegiance. This religious perspective, viewed as a core tenet of their faith, extends into all aspects of their lives, including their educational experiences. For JW students, participating in political activities commonly encouraged in schools may conflict with their religious convictions, which leads to situations where they must carefully navigate the expectations of their educational institutions while remaining true to their faith.

Hence, this study seeks to explore the experiences of JW students regarding their political neutrality and disengagement in educational settings. Specifically, the study determines the following: the political activities encountered by the JW students that affect their religious doctrines, the challenges encountered by the JW students in dealing with these

political activities, and the reconciliation of JW students to their religious commitment and political expectations.

By looking at the experiences of JW students regarding their political neutrality and disengagement in educational settings, the study aims to provide educators and school administrators with insights into the conflicts that arise between political engagements and students' religious commitments. Understanding these dynamics is essential to promoting inclusive environments that respect religious diversity while encouraging civic participation.

Additionally, this research is important for policymakers and educational institutions in developing policies that accommodate students' religious beliefs without compromising educational standards. By identifying the challenges students face in dealing with political activities within schools, this study aims to promote awareness and empathy among educators and support responsive practices that respect students' religious liberty.

This study also contributes to discussions on political socialization, religious freedom, and minority rights. The insights offer valuable perspectives on the intersection of religious and educational institutions. Consequently, this research can serve as a foundation for further studies on religious minorities in educational settings.

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) is a Christian denomination with millenarian beliefs and a non-trinitarian stance, distinguishing it from mainstream Christianity (James, 2005). This group views itself as a restoration of first-century Christianity and emphasizes the importance of using God's name, "Jehovah" (Holden, 2002).

Among their core tenets of faith is that they assert that Jehovah is the only true God, and that all worship should be directed solely to him. They have a distinct understanding of Jesus Christ, viewing him as a significant figure but not equating him with God. Jesus is the only intercessor and the highest priest between God and humanity and is appointed by God as the king and judge of his kingdom. They don't celebrate Christmas, Easter, birthdays, or other holidays, which contradicts their interpretation of Christianity (The Watchtower, 2009; Franz, 2007).

The JW trace their origins to the 1870s in Pennsylvania, United States (US), where a Bible study group led by Charles Taze Russell began re-examining Christian doctrines. By 1881, they formally organized the Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society ("Watch Tower Bible," 2017; Penton, 1997; Jehovah's Witnesses, 1993). After Russell died in 1916, an American lawyer and

judge, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, was elected as JW's next president and adopted the name "Jehovah's Witnesses" in 1931 (Kutler, 2003; Franz, 2007).

In 1939, the JW established legal corporations worldwide, beginning with their main office's relocation to Brooklyn, with the legal name Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc. JWs have also formed and registered other corporations in various countries, including the Philippines (Calauad, 2018; "Watch Tower Bible," 1993).

Despite conforming to legal standards, JW faces challenges due to its distinctive beliefs, such as political neutrality and disengagement. Historically, governments worldwide have conflicted with the JW over their refusal to engage in political activities.

JWs in the US have encountered legal battles that culminated in landmark US Supreme Court cases. One of the prominent cases was *West Virginia v. Barnette* (1943)¹, where the Court ruled that JWs could not be compelled to salute the flag or recite the Pledge of Allegiance in schools, reinforcing their religious liberty. *Cantwell v. Connecticut* (1940)² established that JWs have the right to preach door-to-door without a permit, protecting their religious freedom under the First Amendment. Moreover, in *Watchtower Bible and Tract Society v. Village of Stratton* (2002)³ upheld the right of JWs to engage in public preaching without needing a permit, further affirming their religious freedoms (Gordon, 2011; Gordon, 2010).

In Europe, JWs have also encountered various political and legal embattlements. Notable cases are *Kokkinakis v. Greece* (1993)⁴, which investigates issues of proselytization, while *Bayatyan v. Armenia* (2011)⁵ concerns conscientious objection to military service. Furthermore, the *Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow v. Russia* (2010)⁶ case led to the eventual ban of the organization in Russia, and the *Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses of*

1 *West Virginia State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/319/624/>

2 *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296 (1940). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/310/296/>

3 *Watchtower Bible & Tract Society of N.Y., Inc. v. Village of Stratton*, 536 U.S. 150 (2002). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/536/150/>

4 *Kokkinakis v. Greece*, Application No. 14307/88 (1993). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-57827%22%5D%7D>

5 *Bayatyan v. Armenia*, Application No. 23459/03 (2011). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-105611%22%5D%7D>

6 *Jehovah's Witnesses of Moscow and Others v. Russia*, No. 302/02 (European Court of Human Rights [ECtHR], 2010). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22002-916%22%5D%7D>

Kryvyi Rih v. Ukraine (2020)⁷ concerning registration issues interfered with their right to manifest their religion. Additionally, the strict secularism (*laïcité*) in France has also presented challenges for the religious group involving their legal recognition and operations (Vagramenko & Arqueros, 2023; Golovnev, 2023; Kireyev & Berezko, 2021; Beiser & Stoklosa, 2016; Beard, 2015; Introvigne, 2004; Luca, 2004; Richardson, 2004; Urofsky, 2002).

In Asia, JW's face significant challenges, including imprisonment in countries like Singapore, where there are no legal protections for those who refuse military service on conscientious grounds (UNOHCR, 2022; Cai, 2021). In South Korea, nearly 19,000 JW's have been incarcerated for their refusal to participate in the military draft (Schmalz, 2022; OSCE, 2012; Vladimir, 2009).

In the Philippines, the JW's have faced political issues, such as refusing to salute the flag. First, in *Gerona v. Secretary of Education* (1960)⁸ the Philippine Supreme Court ruled against the JW, upholding the state's authority to require participation in flag ceremonies, and did not recognize their claim to religious freedom at the time. This decision was later overturned in a similar case, *Ebralinag v. Division* (1993)⁹, where the Court finally upheld their religious freedom. The Supreme Court followed the United States Court's decisions in *West Virginia v. Barnette* (1943):

To believe that patriotism will not flourish if patriotic ceremonies are voluntary and spontaneous instead of a compulsory routine is to make an unflattering estimate of the appeal of our institutions to free minds... When they are so harmless to others or to the State as those we deal with here, the price is not too great. But freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter. That would be a mere shadow of freedom. The test of its substance is the right to differ as to things touch the heart of the existing order (Bernas, 2007, p. 272).

The *Ebralinag* case presents how JW students test the boundaries of constitutional freedom and religious tolerance and further illustrates their dilemma in obeying the church and state (Dizon, 2024; Nealega et al., 2023). As Vitug (2011) noted, JW's have left an indelible

7 Religious Community of Jehovah's Witnesses of Kryvyi Rih v. Ukraine, Application No. 35098/16 (2020). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-179553%22%5D%7D>

8 Gerona et al. v. Secretary of Education et al., 106 Phil. 2 (1959). https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri1959/aug1959/gr_l-13954_1959.html

9 Ebralinag v. Division, 219 SCRA 256 (1993), https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri1993/mar1993/gr_95770_1993.html.

mark on Philippine jurisprudence, on landmark cases like *Ebralinag* and *Estrada*¹⁰. Moreover, JWs in the Philippines continue to face challenges of navigating and balancing civic-political expectations and their religious commitment, among which is an evident but underexplored area is the experience of these challenges within school settings.

Political Socialization

The experiences of JW students regarding political activities in schools can be understood through political socialization. For JW students, political socialization is shaped by a complex interplay of religious teachings and social experiences offered by schools. This dynamic is essential for exploring how these students navigate their religious beliefs within educational settings, as they confront the realities of a society that often necessitates political involvement.

Political socialization refers to the process through which individuals develop their political values and behaviors (Paletz et al., 2021; Hague & Harrop, 2013). Hague and Harrop (2013) and Newton and Van Deth (2008) indicate that people's orientation to political symbols, structures, processes, and political preferences and behavior are products of political socialization. Moreover, Verba et al. (1978) provide that political socialization significantly determines various forms of political behavior, ranging in levels of political engagement such as voting, participation in rallies and demonstrations, lobbying policies, political discussions, or involvement in civic activities.

Political socialization is influenced by various agents, including family, peers, media, education, and religion. These agents shape how individuals perceive their societal roles, including political engagement (Rowell, 2006). While various agents of socialization, like peers, family, workplace, and media, influence political attitudes and behavior, this study focuses on religion and education because they directly impact the experiences of JW students. Religious institutions shape political views through their doctrine, while schools encourage political engagement.

Educational institutions or schools play a critical role in political socialization. Many consider schools to be the most influential agents as they mold the political knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of children (Paletz et al., 2021; Simon & Merrill, 1998).

Specifically, education philosopher John Dewey emphasized that schools serve as vital agents of socialization, shaping young individuals by engaging them in society's values

10 Estrada vs. Escritor, SCRA 492 (2006), <https://www.chanrobles.com/cralaw/2006junedecisions.php?id=614>

and norms (Liedgren, 2016). Dewey argued that education inherently fosters socialization, but the quality of this influence relies on the values that society upholds (Ingersoll-Wood, 2022; Ploeg, 2017). Henceforth, schools are not merely places of learning but are essential in preparing students as members of society.

In this capacity, schools instill in their students the knowledge of their society's political systems, history, and rights and responsibilities as citizens (Nie et al., 1996). Further, schools promote civic activities such as engagement in student government, stimulation of nationalistic ceremonies such as flag ceremonies, and readiness for possible military service. Through these activities, schools can influence students' political attitudes and encourage political participation (Paletz et al., 2021).

Religion also shapes individuals' political perspectives and behavior. Studies present that religion is crucial in forming citizens' politics (Djupe & Gilbert, 2009; Layman, 2001; Wald, 1997). Religion instills a sense of identity, community, and moral guidance, influencing followers' political stance. Also, when political concerns are couched in religious terms, believers can be motivated toward certain forms of action (Rebullida, 2006). For instance, certain religious teachings encourage active political participation, while others may advocate for political resistance.

Furthermore, sociologist Gerhard Lenski argues that organized religion helps form socio-religious subcultures (Djupe & Gilbert, 2009). These subcultures create channels for sharing political information and influencing political behavior. Guth et al. (1997), Kohut et al. (2000), and Djupe and Gilbert (2009) show that church members exchange political views during formal church meetings and informal gatherings like coffee hours or small group activities. Through these interactions, members tend to align their political views with those promoted by these subcultures.

Merton's Strain Theory

Strain Theory, conceptualized by sociologist Robert K. Merton, provides valuable insights for studying the experiences of JW students regarding their political neutrality and disengagement in educational settings. A theory explaining deviance, Strain Theory posits that individuals may experience strain when societal expectations or demands conflict with their personal values, norms, or means of achieving goals, resulting in coping strategies to resolve or reduce the strain (Fulcher & Scott, 2011; Rowell, 2006).

Merton¹¹ outlined five ways in which individuals may adapt to strain. These typologies - conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion - represent strategies for coping with societal strain, which arises from the conflict between culturally prescribed goals (e.g., success and social acceptance) and the institutional means available to achieve these goals (e.g., education and political participation). Conformity entails adherence to societal norms and expectations, even when challenges arise. Innovation involves pursuing goals through unconventional means when traditional avenues seem blocked. Ritualism is the strict observance of rules, at the expense of meaningful outcomes. Retreatism describes rejecting societal goals and means, leading to withdrawal from social expectations altogether. Rebellion entails rejecting and replacing both societal norms and goals with new ones (Palispis & Sampa, 2015; Fulcher & Scott, 2011).

Figure 1

Merton's Strain Typology

		Institutional Means	
		Accept	Reject
Cultural Goals	Accept	Conformity Accept approved goals; pursues them through approved means	Innovation Accept approved goals; uses disapproved means
	Reject	Ritualism Abandons society's goals; conforms to approved means	Retreatism Abandons approved goals and approved means
		Rebellion Challenges approved goals and means	

Religion can be a source of strain. Sociologically, the divergence of religious and societal-political expectations can create strain or societal pressures (Perrin, 2014). These individuals may experience feelings of deprivation, alienation, or isolation due to the demands imposed by their religious beliefs, which conflict with societal expectations. This strain can

11 Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," American Sociological Review 3, no. 5 (1938): 672–682, <https://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Robert%20K%20Merton%20-%20Social%20Structure%20and%20Anomie%20Original%201938%20Version.pdf>

lead to reconciling their commitment to their faith with the pressures to conform to societal norms (Perrin, 2014; Lanuza & Raymundo, 2016).

As for JW, their doctrinal emphasis on political neutrality diverges from mainstream societal expectations. This divergence can lead to significant strain as JW students encounter pressures to participate in political activities within educational settings, where societal norms endorse political and civic engagement. In this way, Strain Theory provides a lens to examine how JW students respond to tensions between their religious commitments and the political expectations encountered in educational settings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design rooted in phenomenology. Qualitative designs emphasize understanding social phenomena through direct observation, communication with participants, or analysis of texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While phenomenology aims to explore the essence of lived experiences as perceived by individuals themselves (Arcinas, 2016). Through phenomenology, the study sought to explore how JW students experience and make sense of political neutrality and disengagement in educational settings. Further, phenomenology allows focusing on the participants' own voices and narratives.

Specifically, the study utilized two primary methods of data collection. First, an in-depth, semi-structured interview was utilized to provide a platform for participants to describe their experiences, beliefs, and reflections. Second, document analysis of official JW tracts and publications was employed to validate the interviews and as well offer insight into their doctrinal basis. This dual method also enabled data triangulation, which enhances the findings by corroborating personal experiences with JW's organizational doctrine.

Population and Locale

Participants included 12 students from five congregations in Baguio City who were interviewed. The congregations included Leonila Hill, San Luis, Pines City, Gibraltar, and Legarda. These participants were purposefully selected. The selection criteria will include a member of the JW, aged between 15 and 25 years, ranging from high school to college, and a willingness to participate in the study. Upon approval of the study, the participants

were identified and referred by the elders and ministerial servants.¹² of each congregation. Moreover, 3 elders and 3 ministerial servants were also interviewed since they play significant roles in JW congregations as they provide spiritual guidance and reinforce their doctrines.

Data Collection Procedure and Ethical Considerations

The study employed interviews and document analysis. Primarily, semi-structured interviews were employed. The interviews were conducted from August to December 2018. Before conducting the interviews, permission was requested from the elders in charge of the respective congregations. This process ensured a respectful and transparent engagement with the JW community.

Guide questions were constructed according to the objectives of the study. The questions focus on identifying the political activities and challenges encountered by the JW students and how they reconcile their religious commitment and political expectations.

All participants were fully informed of the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, and assent, along with parental or guardian consent, was secured for participants under the age of 18. Participants were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study.

Furthermore, to ensure the participant's privacy and confidentiality, all identities were anonymized. These measures were important to respect the sensitive nature of religious beliefs and political abstention among JW participants. Hence, in quoting the participants, the abbreviations "S" (Student), "E" (Elder), and "M" (Ministerial Servants) will be used.

For data validation, individual participants were not approached for formal follow-up due to practical limitations. However, ongoing communication was maintained with two elders for clarification and feedback. This decision was taken because elders are viewed by the JW community as spiritual leaders and authoritative and reliable sources, especially for their biblical interpretation.

Data Treatment and Analysis

The data from interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis based on an approach suggested by Sundler et al (2019). The method includes procedures like

12 Each JW congregation is headed by elders and ministerial servants. Elders, equivalent to a clergy-priest, heads and manages congregations. While ministerial servants or ministers, equivalent to deacons, fulfill clerical and attendant duties ("Our Kingdom Ministry," 2004, 1998; Penton, 1997)

identifying themes supported by quotes or codes (Quinto, 2024). This approach allowed for the identification of common patterns and themes related to the experiences of JW students regarding political neutrality and disengagement in educational settings.

For the document analysis of JW publications, key messages were extracted from the texts related to political neutrality and disengagement. Further, data triangulation was employed to analyze interviews and textual material. This was achieved by categorizing these textual messages into themes that mirrored those in the interviews, ensuring consistency between the doctrinal or biblical teachings of the JW organization and the experiences of JW students.

RESULTS

Political activities encountered by the JW students are affecting their religious doctrines

Table 1 shows that the political activities the JW students encounter in schools affect their religious doctrines. The table is organized according to the political activities, specific activities provided by the JW students, JW justification, and JW bible principles. The identified political activities were nationalistic ceremonies, student government, partisan activities, social media politics, engagements and advocacy, and military or scouting-related activities.

Table 1

Political activities encountered by the JW students are affecting their religious doctrines

Political Activities	Specific Activities	JW Justification	JW Bible Principles ¹³
Nationalistic Ceremonies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participating in Flag Ceremonies - Taking the Pledge of Allegiance - Celebrating Patriotic and National Holidays - Participating in Parades 	JWs believe that national symbols and rituals have religious significance. Hence, they considered it idolatrous.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exodus 20:4-5 - 1 Corinthians 10:14 Daniel Chapter 3

13 The following Bible Principles were extracted from the following JW tracts: Awake (1992, 2003), JW (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), The Watchtower (1996, 2002, 2009) and Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc. (1993).

Political Activities	Specific Activities	JW Justification	JW Bible Principles ¹³	
Student Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Running as a student officer - Nominating a student candidate running as an officer - Endorsing a candidate - Campaigning for a student officer - Voting for a student officer 	JW refuses to participate in any political affairs or uphold political positions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Matthew 22:21 - Matthew 4:8-10 - John 15:19 - John 18:36 - 1 John 5:19 - Psalms 118:9 	
Partisan Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Taking sides in partisan discussions - Partaking in partisan debates - Joining in protest actions such as “rallies” or demonstrations - Engaging in a partisan dialogue 			
Social Media Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sharing political partisan posts - Engaging in online political campaigns - Commenting or replying to political posts or partisan-related issues - Using political frames on pictures to endorse political parties or candidates - Partaking in petitions 			

Political Activities	Specific Activities	JW Justification	JW Bible Principles ¹³
Military or scouting-related activities	- Partaking, training, or joining in Citizenship Advancement Training (CAT) Program; Reserved Officer Training Corps (ROTC); and Scout movement activities [(KAB (Kabataan Alay sa Bayan), Boys, and Girls Scout)]	War or war-mimicking violates the 6 th Commandment of prohibiting murder. JWs maintain their virtues of peace and neighbourly love.	- Exodus 20:13 - Isaiah 2:4 - John 15:17-19 - Luke 10:25-27 - Isaiah 54:17 - Micah 4:3-4 - Romans 12:17-19

Nationalistic Rituals. JW students frequently encounter nationalistic rituals and ceremonies, such as flag ceremonies, pledge recitations, celebration of national holidays, and participation in parades, which schools uphold as symbols of citizenship and nationalism. These nationalistic rituals are essential for the State because they inculcate the citizens' loyalty and love of the country. However, for JW students, this may conflict with their religious beliefs.

Almost all students pointed out various biblical principles (Table 1). Summarizing the consistent response is that they believe that the flag violates the 2nd Commandment prohibiting idolatry. Their doctrine refers to Exodus 20:4, which pertains to God forbidding worshipping any idols (JW, n.d.-a). In the view of the JW teachings, the flag simulates idol worship.

Moreover, some liken the disengagement in flag ceremonies to the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego of Daniel, Chapter 3, wherein they refused to bow to the statue erected by King Nebuchadnezzar of ancient Babylon, which associates the ritual with idolatry (JW, n.d.-a).

In addition, E1 pointed out that the JW teachings avoid haughtiness. About nationalistic rituals and haughtiness, E1 expounded, "*We must guard ourselves against haughtiness. Nationalism, along with the rituals associated with it, can foster a sense of pride or superiority, an attitude that can lead one nation to despise another.*"¹⁴

14 All original responses were provided in various languages - Tagalog, Ilocano, English, and Taglish (code switch of Tagalog and English) and have been translated and transcribed into English for simplicity and clarity.

Student Government, Partisan Activities, and Social Media Politics. In schools, JW students encounter political activities that challenge their political neutrality, mainly through student government elections, partisan activities, and social media engagement.

All students consistently mentioned that their faith prescribes that they are prohibited from running, nominating, endorsing, campaigning, or voting for a student-officer. Meanwhile, many students mention that they also avoid partisan activities, which involve taking sides in partisan discussions, joining in protest actions such as “*rallies*” or demonstrations, partaking in partisan debates, and engaging in partisan dialogue. Almost all students agree that political engagement in social media is considered like activities related to elections or partisanship.

The political activities present another challenge for JW students. As schools encourage student voting, and partisan debates or dialogues as part of civic education or using social media as a platform for political advocacies, students uphold their political neutrality, as it contradicts their beliefs. Elders support their response, citing the principle of “*Caesar’s unto Caesar’s,*” wherein JW don’t mingle in political affairs. As affirmed by one of their publications, when it comes to elections and partisanship (JW, n.d.-a):

They follow the example of Jesus, who refused to accept political office (John 6:15). He taught his disciples to be “no part of the world” and, in John 17:14 and Mark 12:13-17, made it clear that they should not take sides in political issues.

Military or Scouting Related Activities. Military and scouting-related activities promote schools as opportunities to develop leadership and patriotism; however, it affects the stance of the JW students. These activities include partaking, training, or joining in the CAT Program, ROTC, and scout movement activities¹⁵.

Various participants share the sentiment of declining to join, partake, train, or even mimic military-related activities. Almost all participants argued that it encourages people to kill or do violence. Meanwhile, M2 added that military activities directly point to nationalism. As elaborated in the discussions about nationalistic rituals, they argue that nationalism causes hatred of one group of people toward another.

Validating their views, various JW publications affirm that participation in military-related activities conflicts with their beliefs. Their refusal to participate is primarily grounded on the Commandment of “*thou shall not murder (Exodus 20:13).*” JWs refrain from acts of violence against their fellowmen, for they regard these as their “neighbors” whom they should love (JW, n.d.-b).

15 CAT (Citizens Army Training) and ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) are military training programs implemented in Philippine high schools and colleges, respectively.

Challenges encountered by the JW students in dealing with political activities

From the identified political activities, JW students faced challenges navigating political activities within their schools. The identified challenges were psychological distress, peer pressure, academic and curricular pressure, social stigmatization, and verbal bullying. The challenges, their sub-themes, and recurring codes from participants' responses are categorized in Table 2.

Table 2

Challenges encountered by the JW students in dealing with political activities

Challenges Identified	Sub-themes	Recurring Codes
Psychological Distress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotional Stress - Cognitive Dissonance - Internal Conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Loneliness - Embarrassment - Self-criticism - Anxiety - Awkwardness - Self-doubt
Peer Pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pressured by Distinctive Traits and Characteristics - Shared Friendship Goals and Desires 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Belongingness - Encouragement - Achieve the same goals and aspirations
Academic and Curricular Pressure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunity for Good Grades - Speculation Affected Grades - Deduction of Grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grade Pressure - Limited academic activities - Lost Plus points - Alternative Assignments - Poor Grades - Deductions
Social Stigmatization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Isolation - Discrimination - Misunderstanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Isolation - Labelling - Negative Judgment - Stereotyping - Mockery - Exclusion
Verbal Bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Received hurtful language - derogatory comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Derogatory comments - Insults - Mockery - Stereotyping

Psychological Distress. The JW students experience psychological distress when faced with political activities, as they must involve their personal faith with the expectations of school. This distress encompasses emotional strain and cognitive dissonance as students

feel pulled between their commitment to faith and the pressures to participate in political activities. Moreover, students experienced loneliness, anxiety, and self-criticism as they grappled with meeting the expectations of their school environment.

Common sub-themes identified were related to emotional strain and distress. Feelings of awkwardness, anxiousness, loneliness, and embarrassment were recorded. S2 narrated, *“During our class election, I felt anxious and awkward that I was the only one abstaining from voting. I felt embarrassed on my part since I was the spotlight in the class during that time.”* S5 shared, *“It was the first week of high school; I felt awkward when my classmates noticed me not putting my hand in my chest during flag ceremonies.”* S2 also said, *“During Grade 3, I am the only one in my class who didn’t participate in the annual KAB Scout Parade. I felt I was left behind”*. S9 provided, *“I will not lie about telling this feeling. I feel lonely when my classmates participate in holiday celebrations or school parades. Seeing them enjoy while I just observe felt sad”*.

Some participants also experienced cognitive dissonance. As S4 shared, *“It’s hard to see everyone else joining in (political activities), and I feel caught between what my faith tells me and what others expect...We recognize the rationale of the activities and the necessity of it for our grades, yet we are also bound to our faith.”* Also, that can be related to political activities; S11 said, *“It feels wrong to stand apart (Classroom Christmas party activity) since I was the only one who was not present in the class. I’m betraying a part of myself no matter what I choose.”*

Peer Pressure. The pressure to conform and participate in school-wide political activities can be particularly challenging for JW students, especially when their classmates or friends encourage them to engage. Many JW students face peer pressure from friends who encourage them to join activities for belonging and shared experience. This encouragement comes from a desire to strengthen friendships and include everyone in group activities. One student noted, *“They just want me to join (student government) so we can lead and also have experience fun together.”*

Some of the peer pressure was because of the distinctive traits of the students. Classmates may not fully understand why these students refrain from certain activities, which can lead to unintended pressure. As S1 noted, *“Sometimes, my friends don’t realize I can’t join certain activities. Due to my height, I was chosen as flag bearer, but despite declining, they kept encouraging me.”* When it comes to student government, S3 shared:

I was suddenly nominated as the Class President. My classmates urged me since they claimed I have good grades and responsible. Even my teacher encouraged me. But I have to explain ... that I can’t be the President since I am a JW...

On the other hand, peer pressure also arises from the desire of friends to share the same goals and aspirations. Regarding military activities, S6 shared, *“Almost all of my friends take the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) examination. When friends insist me taking the examination, it’s tough to explain without appearing unfriendly.”* S11 also provided, *“When we were to enroll for the 2nd Semester, my friends insisted I enroll in Basic ROTC. I instead enrolled in NSTP (National Service Training Program)”*.

Academic and Curricular Pressure. Schools usually incorporate political participation into academic requirements, placing JW students in a conflicting position between their beliefs and academic obligations.

Participants felt in a position of losing an opportunity to have good grades. Relating to dissonance, S1 shared, *“My teacher stated that those who will join and participate in the IP (Indigenous Peoples) Month city parade will have plus points. It feels unfair to lose an opportunity, because I can’t join.”*

Also, some view that there is a constrained nature of academic activities, offering limited alternatives. S2 provided:

It’s frustrating when teachers grade our participation in activities such as Buwan ng Wika¹⁶ or National Heroes Day. We recognize the rationale of the activities and their necessity for our grades, yet we are also bound by our faith.

In some aspects, the students also speculated that their stance led to poor grades. S5 detailed *“In my card (Form 138), I have a low grade in the Makabansa¹⁷. I believe this was because of my stance during flag ceremonies.”* While S8 commented regarding CAT, *“I’m glad my school offered an alternative to CAT. However, I felt my grade was affected since my community service alternative didn’t match the higher value given to military training.”* In relation, S7 expressed that he struggles with politically related debates in class. He pointed out that, first, *“he is not confident in public speaking”*. Second, he believes that his faith has influenced his perspective, making engaging in such discussions difficult.

16 Buwan ng Wika (Language Month) is an annual celebration in the Philippines, held in August, dedicated to promoting Filipino language, culture, and national pride.

17 The Philippine grading system also assesses students based on core values, namely: Maka-Diyos (God-centeredness), Makatao (humanitarianism), Makakalikasan (environmental stewardship), and Makabansa (nationalism)

Meanwhile, some participants speculated that disengaging led to grade deductions. One shared, *“There were CAT meetings scheduled on Saturdays, and I attend religious services that day. Since attendance was a factor of the grades, it affected my grades”*. S7 contended, *“I asked my AP (Araling Panlipunan/Civic Education) teacher to offer an alternative activity regarding who I vote for in the election (2016). He gave an alternative, but I speculated he manipulated my scores out of my special treatment”*.

Social Stigmatization. JW students may face stigmatization and discrimination from peers due to their religious abstention from political activities. Because of their disengagement from these activities, students feel isolated within their school. About self-doubt and loneliness, S8 stated, *“In cultural and social activities in schools, only a few of us were not in attire and were watching from the bleachers. My schoolmates look at us. I feel like they think I am an outsider.”*

Some students also felt excluded, illustrating how stigma can create barriers to collaboration and friendship. For example, one participant reflected on their experiences, stating, *“I feel left out during group activities because my friends don’t invite me to join since they know I won’t participate in political discussions or celebrations.”* Another shared, *“During group projects, I notice that some classmates avoid partnering with me due to my beliefs.”*

Moreover, their neutrality is associated with perceptions of inferiority, weakness, or a lack of commitment. For instance, S2 said, *“In class debates, my classmates asked why I am neutral, with an expressive pouting face.”* Similarly, S3 mentioned, *“When I choose to abstain from these activities, I hear my classmates say I lack commitment.”* S4 added, *“I feel like my classmates and teachers see me as less intelligent just because I don’t engage in political conversations.”*

In relation, mockery also emerges as a challenge among JW students. Interviews reveal classmates ridicule their beliefs through mocking gestures and comments. For example, S4 recounted an incident where classmates would perform exaggerated hand salutes to belittle the JW practice of military abstention. Another participant shared how their peers would frequently mention *“Jehovah”* mockingly in conversations.

Also, misunderstandings about the JW can create negative judgment and incorrect assumptions about JW students. This may cause others to view JW students as politically apathetic or uninterested. S4 commented, *“They think I am politically apathetic or illiterate. But I am actually interested in knowing the country’s state of affairs and political conditions. The context is that I don’t take sides.”*

To an extent, students were associated with being anti-state or anti-government. For instance, S5 remarked, “*Some of my classmates think I’m unpatriotic just because I don’t participate in certain activities.*” In relation, E1 supplemented:

People assume I’m against my country when I refuse to join military-related events, but they don’t fully understand it. Let us debunk the misconceptions that we are anti-government. We don’t challenge or resist authorities. We actually follow the government on what the government says. However, with the exception that it doesn’t violate our beliefs.

Verbal Bullying. Some JW students experience verbal bullying because of their political abstention. Verbal bullying can be both a response to other challenges and a contributing factor to additional difficulties they encounter in schools.

For disengaging in various political activities, some students received hurtful comments. Comments like “*kulto* (cult member),” “*demonyo* (demon),” and “*bobo* (stupid)” show a deep misunderstanding of their beliefs and practices. These labels reflect not only deep misunderstanding but also the persistence of religious stereotypes shaped by dominant narratives. As noted by Aquino (2004) and Covar (2016), such terms stem from Western-influenced frameworks that marginalize non-mainstream faiths, labeling them as cultic or irrational. These stereotypes contribute to the stigma and alienation JW students face in school environments.

Additionally, S4, S5, and S9 were wrongfully branded with more extreme labels such as “*anti-Christ*,” “*Satanist*,” “*extremist*,” “*terrorist*,” and “*communist*.” The students argue that this is a total misconception of their faith and oppose the meanings associated with these labels. E1 defended that JWs uphold values of “*peace, respect, and non-violence*”. They express concern that such misrepresentations distort their identity and intentions, leading to further misunderstanding.

Reconciliation of JW students to their religious commitment and political expectations

In exploring the intersection of their faith and the political expectations in their schools, JW students employ various strategies to balance their religious commitments while minimizing conflict. These approaches are silent observation, respectful withdrawal, requests for alternatives, confirmation, and private reflection and prayer.

Table 3

Reconciliation of JW students to their religious commitment and political expectations

Reconciliation Approach	Sub-themes	Recurring Codes
Silent Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-participation with presence - Maintaining decorum - Passive engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - quietly observing - stand straight and be quiet - behave in a proper decorum
Respectful Withdrawal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abstention from voting or religious ceremonies - Courteous avoidance of participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I choose to abstain - quietly step aside - respect to others
Appeal and Request for Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negotiation with teachers - Academic accommodations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - allowed to do community service - asked for another role - alternative assignments
Conforming to Political Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Selective participation - Pressure-driven conformity - Avoiding stigmatization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - joined in minimal political activities - didn't want to be singled out, avoiding stigmatization - easier to conform
Private Reflection and Prayer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inner coping mechanism - Spiritual resilience - Maintaining personal faith 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - silently pray - reconnect with values

Silent Observation. Rather than engaging in political activities, all participants opt for silent observation during political or nationalistic events. For flag ceremonies, all participants noted that they would just stay with their classmates during the ceremony, quietly observing but not joining the salute and singing along. As with nationalistic-related occasions, class political debates, or student elections, all participants expressed that they would observe in a behaved manner but would not participate in any action. Elders and ministers also provided information on how JW should respond during these activities. E1 elucidated, *“The congregation always emphasizes that the best way is to respect things outside. We behave and act in proper decorum. We stand straight and are quiet. We will not destruct, disrupt, or act violently in response to these activities.”*

Respectful Withdrawal. The JW students choose to respectfully withdraw from political activities to uphold their religious beliefs. One student stated, *“When there’s voting, I choose to abstain”*. Also, when asked about participating in street demonstrations, such as being invited to join a rally, S2 firmly responded, *“I wouldn’t join. It goes against my faith to take part”*.

Applicable to political activities, another student described how she handles situations involving different religious observances: *"I quietly step aside when it's time for a mass; it's my way of showing respect to others, even if I don't participate."* This approach also emphasizes another teaching of JW, which emphasizes maintaining personal convictions while also being considerate of the beliefs of others. As E1 affirmed this perspective, stating, *"It's important for our members to remember that our actions reflect our faith, and we can honor our convictions while still respecting others (referring to other religions' practices and political acts)."*

Appeal and Request for Alternatives. As shown in the early responses, JW students request alternative assignments or activities that align more closely with their beliefs, finding ways to meet academic requirements without compromising their faith.

Fortunately, many of the students' schools accommodate these requests. For instance, S3 expressed, *"We have a debate activity with a political topic, and I asked to be moved to an issue-based one instead. My teacher granted it."* Similarly, S4 explained, *"I spoke with my teacher about an alternative to the CAT drills, and they allowed me to do community service instead."* A participant also narrated a role-play experience: *"There was an activity where we held toy guns as props. I declined and asked for another role."*

While many accommodations are helpful, a few encountered challenges. In some cases reported under the challenges *Academic and Curricular Pressure*, some students feel that the alternatives offered don't fully match the educational value of the original activity, which leaves them feeling left out or at an academic disadvantage.

Conforming to the Political Activities. A few JW students reported that they partially participated in some activities. Some participated in parts of activities they feel do not directly conflict with their faith. S6 shared, *"I joined in the props making in a parade instead of joining in the actual parade (Panagbenga Parade.¹⁸)"*

Notably, few reported fully participating in political or civic activities despite their belief. The students prioritized avoiding stigmatization and academic repercussions over adhering strictly to their beliefs. They felt it was easier to conform than face potential stigmatization, isolation, or lower grades. As one student explained, *"I joined the activity (withheld) fully because I didn't want to be singled out in class."* Another stated, *"I just go with the flow in flag ceremonies (doing actual protocol, i.e., hand in chest) to avoid issues"*.

18 Panagbenga, also called the Baguio Flower Festival, is a cultural occasion in the Baguio City.

Private Reflection and Prayer. Almost all participants turn to personal reflection or prayer during events where they can't fully participate. This helps them find inner peace and maintain a sense of faith amidst challenging situations. A student expressed, "*While others are engaged in the ceremony, I silently pray to feel close to my beliefs.*"

Further, according to the students, these acts serve to reconnect with their values and offer a comforting refuge, helping them cope with their unique position as observers rather than participants. According to E1, "*Prayer is not only a communication with God but a source of strength...when faced with situations that challenge our beliefs.*" E1 further connects the acts of prayer paralleling to political prosecutions:

It kind of reminds us of the Book of Acts, that the Christians back in Ancient Rome, when they were being persecuted. They pray despite the danger of being executed inside the Colosseum. Or like in Daniel, prayer is strong just like when Shadrach and his friends were thrown in the pit.

DISCUSSIONS

The experiences of JW students regarding their political neutrality and disengagement in educational settings present a complex interplay of challenges and coping strategies that can be understood through the lens of political socialization and Merton's Strain Theory.

For JW students, political socialization occurs primarily through the teachings of their faith, which emphasizes a strict adherence to political neutrality. Based on the findings, the JW teachings fundamentally discourage participation in the identified political activities. JW teachings instill a sense of separation from political affairs, leading to a strong commitment to political neutrality (The WatchTower, 2014; "Watch Tower Bible," 1993). These biblical interpretations shape the political views of JW students. As a result, their political socialization differs significantly from that of their classmates and teachers, who may be encouraged to engage in political activities.

This shared perspective creates a strong confirmation of their faith. But it can also lead to feelings of conflict when faced with the political activities typical in educational settings. These students encounter situations that challenge their commitment to political neutrality in schools. Based on the findings, JW students face various challenges, leading to psychological distress, social stigmatization, peer pressure, academic pressure, and verbal bullying.

As a result, their experiences in school lead them to develop various coping mechanisms. These mechanisms may include silent observation, respectful withdrawal, alternatives, confirmation, and prayer. Based on the findings, Merton's Strain Theory offers

an insightful framework. It suggests that when JW students are unable to achieve acceptance within their educational environment of these political activities, they may adopt various behaviors to cope with the strain.

Figure 2

JW Students' Coping Mechanisms through Merton's Strain Typology

		Institutional Means	
		Accept	Reject
Cultural Goals	Accept	<p>Conformity Participation in political activities amidst conflict with their faith to avoid social and academic repercussion. (Example: Conforming to the political activities)</p>	<p>Innovation Requesting alternative assignments or roles in place of political activities (Example: Requests for alternatives)</p>
	Reject	<p>Ritualism Adherence to rules or routines with reduced attachment to these political activities. (Example: silent observation and private reflection and prayer)</p>	<p>Retreatism Withdrawal from school-related political activities. (Example: Respectful withdrawal)</p>
		<p>Rebellion Notably absent among JW students as they adhere to peaceful and non-disruptive adaptations to strains.</p>	

First, conformity is evident when few JW students participate in political activities despite potential conflicts with their faith. This response is motivated by a desire to avoid social stigmatization and academic repercussions. For instance, those who fully engage in activities like debates or CAT training represent a form of conformity even if they feel uncomfortable.

Next, innovation involves finding alternative means to meet the same end, which aligns with JW students' strategy of respectfully requesting alternatives. Students can fulfill

academic requirements in ways that respect their faith by seeking alternative assignments or roles in political activities (e.g., choosing community service over military drills).

Meanwhile, ritualism represents adherence to rules or routines with reduced attachment to institutional goals. In JW students, this can manifest as silent observation or private reflection and prayer during activities like political discussions or ceremonies, where they participate minimally or only in appearance. By just “going through” without active engagement, they honor their obligations outwardly while internally distancing themselves from activities conflicting with their beliefs.

Then retreatism entails withdrawal from these political activities and academic expectations altogether, as seen in respectful withdrawal, where students decline these activities. Those who withdraw demonstrate retreatism by abstaining from certain school events and requesting to be excused based on their beliefs. This choice enables them to avoid direct participation in activities misaligned with their faith.

Lastly, rebellion, wherein individuals reject societal goals and the accepted means of achieving them and seek to replace them with new systems of values and norms. However, among JW students, rebellion is notably absent. This can be affirmed by their stance of refusing to join in protest action such as “*rallies*” or demonstrations. Instead of rejecting the structure of school and society entirely, these students engage with their educational environments selectively, focusing on respecting their faith’s principles without attempting to overturn the education institution’s requirements. Based on the findings, JW students, strain behavior totally presents peaceful and non-disruptive adaptations, such as respectfully stepping aside during activities or observing silently rather than through outright rejection, resistance, or defiance of school authority.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides the experiences of JW students as they navigate their religious beliefs, upholding political neutrality and disengagement within educational settings, particularly as they confront the realities of a society that necessitates political participation. Within schools, JW students encountered political activities affecting their religious belief such as nationalistic ceremonies, student government, partisan activities, social media politics, engagements and advocacy, and military activities. Despite their efforts to remain neutral, JW students face psychological difficulties, stigmatization, peer pressure, and, in some cases, academic consequences for non-participation. The findings show that these students adopt diverse strategies, such as respectful withdrawal, silent observation, and requesting alternatives, to balance their religious principles with the demands of academic and extracurricular political activities. Drawing on Merton’s Strain Theory, these coping

mechanisms can be understood as adaptive responses to the social strain imposed by competing values, where students must reconcile their identity with institutional expectations.

This study suggests the need for increased awareness and sensitivity within educational institutions to minimize the psychological distress and social stigma of JW students. This can be done through awareness campaigns and seminar workshops that explore the connection between politics, religion, and human rights. In schools and universities, these topics can be included in the curriculum of courses in the social sciences, particularly in political science, psychology, religion, philosophy, and law.

Additionally, this research contributes to the broader discourse on political socialization and religious neutrality, providing insights into how minority religious groups maintain their beliefs within secular and politically active settings. Possible future studies can explore other minority religious groups to deepen understanding of their unique experiences and challenges in similar contexts.

The findings advocate for policies that allow for respectful accommodation, ensuring that all students can fulfill their academic requirements without compromising their personal beliefs. This could include reviewing current laws to make sure they protect religious freedom and prevent discrimination. Moreover, the findings can provide insights and considerations in broader policy initiatives and future sentiments, such as the proposed revival of mandatory military training and conscription. These efforts aim to create a more inclusive and respectful environment where both individual rights and national interests are carefully balanced.

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