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Youth Activists and Democracy : A Literature Review of Contributions to the Transformation of Critical Citizenship

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ABSTRACT
Effective political socialization fosters strong political awareness, which in turn encourages active and meaningful political participation. A critical citizen not only understands their rights and responsibilities but also possesses the ability to think reflectively and respond to social injustices. To strengthen political awareness among the younger generation, it is necessary to have political socialization agents who can tailor their strategies to the characteristics of youth. In this study, the agent in question is young activists. The method employed in this research is a literature study. The findings indicate that young activists play a significant role in enhancing political awareness among the younger generation and in shaping the character of critical citizens. Although often perceived as lacking experience, young activists have demonstrated a tangible impact in cultivating critical citizenship through various initiatives. This study aims to examine the contribution of young activists as political socialization agents in shaping critical citizens. The findings show that young activists have successfully acted as political socialization agents who strengthen political awareness among youth.

Keywords: *Youth activist, Citizen, Political Awareness, Political Socialization*

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Introduction

According to the Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia, an activist is an individual who works actively in an organization, be it a political, social, labor, farmer, youth, student, or women's organization, to encourage the implementation of a particular goal or activity. Based on this definition, activists are not only those who move on the streets carrying certain issues, but also those who work actively in organizations to achieve common goals. In higher education, the term activist refers to students who are active and involved in organizational activities. Young activists are those who understand true democracy, uphold human values, and have intellectual culture (Badrun, 2018).

In their journey, young activists now often start their journey as an activist by guarding issues on campus to participate in voicing public unrest on issues that are happening in the country of Indonesia so

that both directly and indirectly young activists through the movements and steps taken act as agents of political socialization that encourage the strengthening of political awareness which is expected to make the Indonesian people, the majority of the younger generation, become critical citizens.

Political awareness possessed by the younger generation is key in forming critical citizens. A critical citizen not only understands their rights and obligations, but also has the ability to think reflectively and be responsive to injustice. Research shows that engagement in civic activities, including both traditional and informal political activities, helps youth develop trust in political institutions as well as strengthen social connectedness within their communities (Russ & Gaus, 2021; , Laughland-Booÿ & Ghazarian, 2020). Moreover, engaging in activities such as participatory research gives youth the opportunity to contribute directly to decisions that affect their lives (Kornbluh et al., 2015).

Being a critical citizen is also determined by the quality of political participation. Political participation of the younger generation is an important indicator in measuring the quality of a country's democracy. In this context, young activists play a crucial role as agents of change capable of driving political, social and cultural dynamics. They engage through various forms of activities, such as demonstrations and digital campaigns, which reflect sensitivity to national issues and signify a growing political awareness among the younger generation (Malin et al., 2015; Rainsford, 2017). If political participation only stops at being a voter during elections then of course critical citizens will not be formed. As democracy is a long process, political participation should no longer be considered and seen as a single element of becoming a voter during elections.

Furthermore, despite developments in the political participation of young people, research on their role in shaping political consciousness is still relatively limited. Some studies suggest that youth are often alienated from formal political institutions, leading them to turn to more informal and community-based forms of engagement (Malin et al., 2015; Rainsford, 2017). There is also evidence that educational activities that promote positive development can increase political engagement and social awareness among youth (Barnason et al., 2022; .

This paper seeks to review the literature that addresses the relationship between youth activism, political awareness and critical citizen character building, and highlights the importance of effective civic education in facilitating their political engagement. Successful strategies in this context involve strengthening critical thinking skills and engaging young people in relevant political discussions (Barnason et al., 2022; Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2019). Using the literature review method, the authors identify gaps in existing research and offer a conceptual framework for understanding the contribution of young activists in building a resilient and democratic civil society.

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a type of literature study (library research). The subjects of this research are young activists who have the character of caring for democracy, upholding human values, and intellectual culture. These sources can be in the form of books, journal articles, research reports, and other relevant and credible publications. The literature used was selected based on its suitability to the topic, year of publication, and its contribution to the discussion of political issues and civic education. The selection process was rigorous to select literature that was most relevant to the research focus. Literature that was not directly related to the main topic or had questionable credibility was eliminated from the review. The data obtained was analyzed using content analysis techniques. This analysis was conducted by identifying, classifying and interpreting the main themes that emerged in various related literatures. The results of the analysis were presented in a descriptive-analytical form to show the relationship between concepts and support the research argument..

Results and Discussion

Activism becomes something extraordinary when we look back at the historical contributions of young academics in the fight for Indonesia's independence**.** The spirit of students in voicing injustice in their homeland has become an inseparable part of their identity as activists. This activism began with the emergence of ideas behind the founding of youth organizations such as *Boedi Oetomo*, *Jong Java*, *Indonesische Studie-Club*, and others, which grew within academic environments and gave rise to a generation now recognized as student activists.

As the foundation for the youth movement, young activists usually begin their journey during their time in college by becoming student activists. Activists play a role in monitoring and driving social, economic, and political changes through campus organizations. These organizations serve as spaces for students to discuss, exchange ideas, and formulate shared visions and missions. Those who are committed to addressing various social issues actively engage in organizations with the aim of realizing a collective vision for change. This is what defines a student activist.

Campus organizations, which are typically filled with young activists, are generally divided into two main categories: internal campus organizations such as the Student Executive Board (BEM) and Departmental Student Associations, and external campus organizations such as the Islamic Student Association (HMI), the Indonesian National Student Movement (GMNI), and the Indonesian Islamic Student Movement (PMII).

The goals and achievements of youth activism vary depending on the challenges of their respective eras, with their struggles leaving a mark through every regime change. During the pre-independence era, the primary focus of student movements was to fight for freedom and resist colonial oppression. In the Old Order period after independence, young activists demanded President Soekarno's resignation. Meanwhile, in the New Order era, protests erupted across major cities in response to Soeharto's authoritarian and militaristic regime. This demonstrates that the political activism of young generations will continue, given their consistent role in advocating change for the people. History has also shown that many youth activists begin their journeys as student activists.

Dawson identified four methods of direct political socialization: imitation, anticipatory political socialization, political education, and political experience.Imitation is the initial stage of political socialization, where individuals adopt political values, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. This process, known as primary socialization, marks the first step in forming one's identity. Imitation can be categorized into two types: passive imitation, where one copies entirely, and creative imitation, where one imitates but adapts elements to suit personal preferences.

Anticipatory political socialization refers to the process by which individuals prepare themselves with knowledge about the values, attitudes, and behaviors related to a specific role or position. For instance, an elected legislator will study and prepare to serve the public according to the responsibilities of their role. Political experience significantly influences an individual's political attitudes and orientation. This experience acts as a tool to broaden political understanding, gained through one's level of engagement in political activities. The more intensely a person participates in political processes, the more extensive their accumulated political experience will be. In the context of direct political socialization, an individual's critical thinking ability becomes a key factor in internalizing these political values and understandings (Handoko et al., 2023).

Political education is a method that actively promotes the dissemination of political values, attitudes, and orientations to the wider society (Wijaya & Amalia, 2024). This activity is often carried out by agents of socialization such as schools, political parties, and government institutions. Through direct interaction between these political socialization agents, it is hoped that the public will gain a better understanding of national and civic life.

In the context of political socialization implementation, Paul Allen Beck, in his work Political Socialization Across the Generations, distinguishes two main approaches: the teaching perspective and the learning perspective. The fundamental difference between the two lies in the level of individual participation as the subject of political socialization (Beck, 1975). The teaching perspective represents an approach that places individuals in a passive position, where political information is delivered in a one-way manner, without providing space for feedback or interaction. In contrast, the learning perspective emphasizes the active role of individuals in the socialization process, enabling them to develop understanding, express opinions, and even criticize or reject the information received. This approach fosters a more participatory and dialogic form of socialization.

Based on this theory, researchers conclude that young activists have strong potential to serve as effective agents of political socialization. This study aims to explore the campaign strategies implemented by young activists, particularly those that include elements of political education, and their role in shaping individual political awareness and character. These strategies align with the main goals of political education,

namely to enhance the political capacity of society and to cultivate patterns of participation that are intelligent, critical, and effective in political life.

Civil society is defined as a political space that ensures independent behavior, actions, and reflection through discussion, free from the constraints of material conditions and outside of government institutions. Furthermore, civil society is often manifested in the form of organizations or associations established by the public beyond the influence of the state. In Indonesia, civil society has undergone transformations over time, as can be observed from its historical development (Hikam, 2015).

Tocqueville observed that democracy requires an active civil society. The presence of such a society serves as a crucial driving force in democratic processes, making it an essential asset for the legitimacy, efficiency, and stability of democratic governance (Backes & Lindenberger, 2024).

Digital technology can play a supportive role in the movements of civil society by facilitating the dissemination of information, community building, fundraising, recruitment, and advocacy. In this regard, civil society has embraced technology as a tool for advocating equal access and the protection of human rights. The use of digital platforms for advocacy can include efforts such as citizen engagement, citizen science, and more (Lynn et al., 2022).

In Indonesia, civil society is reflected through nonprofit organizations and individuals who actively engage in social advocacy. One such nonprofit organization is Beneran Indonesia, which focuses on character and civic education by creating collaborative spaces for the younger generation. Its programs include Creating for Impact, Beneran Volunteer, Aku Cinta Indonesia, Beneran Bersinar, and Beneran Berdampak, all supported by the use of digital media such as websites and social media platforms (Beneran Indonesia, n.d.).

In addition, individual activists such as celebrities Pandji Pragiwaksono, Bintang Emon, and Fiersa Besari have played an active role in voicing political concerns. For instance, they responded via social media to the decision of the Legislative Body of the House of Representatives, which rejected the Constitutional Court's ruling No. 70/PU-XXII/2024 regarding age requirements for regional head candidates. Their responses varied in tone and content (Tempo, 2024). The presence of civil society organizations in Indonesia, both past and present, is protected under the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, article 28E, paragraph 3, which states: "Every person shall have the right to freedom of association, assembly, and expression" (Tim Redaksi, 2018).

The nature of political participation has evolved—whereas in the past it was conducted through conventional means, it now occurs through the internet and online media (Lestari et al., 2024). As such, the advocacy efforts carried out by nonprofit organizations and active individuals can significantly influence the development of political participation. Consequently, the internet and digital platforms have become new media for expressing political participation, understanding, and political stance.

Conclusion

Through the literature review, it can be concluded that young activists have a strategic and significant role in the process of forming critical citizens in the context of democracy. Young activists are not only part of the process of social and political change, but also appear as agents of political socialization who are able to bridge democratic values to their peers who currently dominate the population in Indonesia. This role is carried out through various forms of involvement, such as social issue campaigns that are packaged with pop culture, policy advocacy that also goes through the process of reviewing and observing policies that often involve experts, public discussions, and the use of digital media to spread inclusive and progressive political awareness. One of the main contributions of young activists lies in their ability to raise the political awareness of the younger generation in a participatory manner. They not only convey political information, but also encourage critical thinking, healthy discourse, and the courage to voice social justice. With a more egalitarian and communicative approach, young activists present a pattern of political socialization that is relevant to the dynamics of the times and the characteristics of the digital generation. Findings from various literatures also show that political awareness that grows through interaction with young activists does not stop at passive understanding, but rather develops into reflective awareness and encourages active political participation. In this case, the role of young activists not only shapes attitudes, but also influences political action, whether in the form of elections, social movements or involvement in communities of change. Although often perceived as inexperienced or overly idealistic, research shows that

young activists play a key role in strengthening the foundations of a democracy based on participation and critical consciousness. As such, their presence should be seen as a potential, not a threat, in the process of citizen political education. Overall, this study confirms that in a democratic society, young activists are an important element that encourages the creation of citizens who are aware, critical and active in guarding democratic values and social justice. Therefore, it is important for educational institutions, governments and civil society to support, empower and recognize their contributions as an integral part of sustainable democratic development.

Based on the results and findings in this literature review, there are several suggestions that can be made. First, for young activists, it is hoped that they will continue to develop their role as agents of political socialization with an adaptive, responsive and flexible approach to the development of the younger generation, both through digital media and through other discussion and educational forums. Second, for future researchers, it is recommended to conduct empirical field research to further test the real influence of young activists' activities on increasing the awareness and political participation of the younger generation. In addition, there is also a need for studies that highlight the internal dynamics of the youth activism movement, including strategies, challenges, obstacles and innovative forms of political socialization carried out by young activists. This is because young activists with their unique characteristics are still interesting to study further, considering that the younger generation is currently the majority of the population in Indonesia and they have great potential to participate in successfully strengthening citizens to become critical citizens in the democratic process.

The implications of this research show that young activists have a strategic role in strengthening the political awareness of the younger generation and shaping the character of critical citizens through a participatory political socialization process. Theoretically, this finding enriches the study of critical citizenship and confirms the importance of non-formal political socialization agents such as young activists. Practically, the results of this study can be used by educational institutions, youth organizations, and policy makers to design political education strategies that are more relevant to the characteristics of the younger generation. The social implications of these findings are also important, as they can change the negative perception of young activists who are often considered inexperienced, even though they actually contribute significantly to promoting social change and democracy. Furthermore, in terms of policy, the results of this study can be used as a basis for the government to develop programs and policies that are more inclusive and pro-youth, especially in the context of strengthening political participation and civic education at various levels of education.

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