



Building Political Awareness of Generation Z in Medan City: Political Literacy as a Fortress against Radicalism and Identity Politics

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the level of political literacy and the views of Generation Z in Medan City on the issues of identity politics and radicalism. The method used is a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through interviews, observations, and documentation. The results of the study show that the majority of Generation Z has limited political understanding and tends to follow the flow of public opinion, especially through social media. Although they generally reject the practice of identity politics and radicalism, this rejection is more emotional than based on deep conceptual understanding. The low level of political literacy and critical awareness is a challenge in forming a participatory and democratically resilient young generation. Therefore, increasing political literacy, anti-radicalism education, and understanding of diversity need to be instilled through formal education, digital literacy campaigns, and strengthening national values. This study recommends multi-sector collaboration to build a Generation Z that is politically aware, inclusive, and resilient to extreme ideologies.

Keyword: Political Literacy, Identity, Radicalism, Generation Z

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tingkat literasi politik serta pandangan Generasi Z di Kota Medan terhadap isu politik identitas dan radikalisme. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mayoritas Generasi Z memiliki pemahaman politik yang masih terbatas dan cenderung mengikuti arus opini publik, terutama melalui media sosial. Meskipun mereka secara umum menolak praktik politik identitas dan paham radikalisme, penolakan tersebut lebih bersifat emosional daripada didasarkan pada pemahaman konseptual yang mendalam. Rendahnya literasi politik dan kesadaran kritis ini menjadi tantangan dalam membentuk generasi muda yang partisipatif dan tangguh secara demokratis. Oleh karena itu, peningkatan literasi politik, edukasi anti-radikalisme, dan pemahaman terhadap keberagaman perlu ditanamkan melalui pendidikan formal, kampanye literasi digital, dan penguatan nilai-nilai kebangsaan. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan kolaborasi multisektor untuk membangun Generasi Z yang sadar politik, inklusif, dan berdaya tangkal terhadap ideologi ekstrem.

Kata kunci : Literasi Politik, Identitas, Radikalisme, Genarasi Z

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Introduction

Discussions about politics are an inseparable part of modern society. Politics is a crucial element in a social system that continues to evolve in line with the dynamics of the times, culture, and values held by society (Muhammad Denis Irwandi; Randika Akbar; Rahmat Santa, 2023); (Wawan Sobari, 2025). In practice, politics should be a means of organizing public life in a just and civilized manner. However, the reality on the ground often shows that politics is perceived as an arena for power struggles rife with intrigue (Susilo & Isbandiyah, 2018). This negative perception shows the urgency of the importance of a correct understanding of the meaning and role of politics in national and state life (Muhammad Denis Irwandi; Randika Akbar; Rahmat Santa, 2023).

Indonesian democracy is highly dependent on the political awareness of the people and the integrity of political actors (Aditiyawarman, 2020). However, the phenomenon of declining ethics and morals among leaders, reflected in cases of corruption and abuse of power, indicates the weakness of a healthy political culture (Mahdy, 2020). In this context, the younger generation, particularly Generation Z, holds a strategic position as first-time voters who will determine the future direction of democracy. Therefore, fostering political literacy from an early age is imperative.

Generation Z grew up in a digital environment that made it easy for them to access political information from various sources (Muaviah et al., 2023). This potential could be a powerful force in building their political awareness. However, the flow of unverified information also poses its risks, such as the formation of biased opinions, the rise of political apathy, and social polarization (Rachmawati & Agustine, 2021). This is where political literacy is important, as the ability to understand, filter, and respond to political information critically and responsibly.

Political literacy is not just mastery of terms or procedures, but includes the ability to think critically, understand the rights and obligations of citizens, and actively participate in political life (Katarudin & Putri, 2020). This is even more important in the run-up to democratic moments such as elections, where the votes of Generation Z have significant power in determining the future direction of the nation.

However, the main challenge in building political literacy in Generation Z is the tendency towards apathy and consuming information without adequate digital literacy (Fitriani et al., 2022). Based on data from the General Elections Commission, voters from Generation Z in the 2024 Election will reach around 46.8 million people, or more than half of the total permanent voter list (Setiawan & Djafar, 2023). This figure shows the importance of paying attention to this segment for the sake of the sustainability of quality democracy.

In addition to low literacy rates, Generation Z also faces challenges from issues such as identity politics and radicalism. Identity politics, the politicization of ethnic, religious, or group differences for electoral gain, poses a threat to national unity (Juhana Nasrudin, 2019). If not balanced with sound political literacy, this practice can trigger horizontal conflict. Yet, the values of Pancasila and Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of brotherhood and justice (Kholisah et al., 2021); (Indra Suardi; Nudiani; Sibawaihi; Hasan Basri, 2024).

On the other hand, radicalism also targets the younger generation through social media, by exploiting religious issues and social dissatisfaction (Yunus, 2017). According to (Najamuddin et al, 2025), Generation Z is a potential target for the spread of extreme ideologies. Therefore, in addition to political literacy, strengthening awareness of the dangers of radicalism is also crucial for developing a moderate and patriotic generation.

Medan, a large city with ethnic and cultural diversity, represents a miniature version of Indonesia. However, the low political literacy of Generation Z in this city indicates a gap in understanding of important issues such as democracy, identity politics, and radicalism. This situation poses a serious challenge to the sustainability of an inclusive and democratic political order at the local and national levels. Based on this background, this study aims to examine the political literacy level of Generation Z in Medan City, as well as their understanding of crucial issues such as identity politics and radicalism. This research is expected to contribute to designing contextual and transformative political education strategies to shape a young generation that is politically intelligent, tolerant, and imbued with integrity.

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to deeply describe Generation Z's meanings, perceptions, and responses to political issues such as political literacy, identity politics, and radicalism in Medan. This approach was chosen based on the consideration that subjective understanding and narratives of individual experiences cannot be fully revealed through a quantitative approach (Sugiyono, 2020). While a mixed methods approach can provide a quantitative picture of political literacy levels, this study places greater emphasis on exploring the subjects' internal meanings and dynamics, thus retaining a qualitative approach. This decision is also based on the study's exploratory goal of understanding the subjects' context, values, and motivations, rather than simply measuring variables statistically.

The study was conducted in Medan City, North Sumatra Province, with a focus on Generation Z, which includes high school students and university

students. The sampling technique was purposive, but with adjustments to more objective selection criteria, namely: ages between 17–25 years, coming from different school or campus backgrounds, and including respondents who are both active and inactive in socio-political activities. This was intended to avoid selection bias against groups that only have a high political interest, so that demographic representation is more balanced. Researchers also considered diversity in gender, ethnicity, religion, and residential location to ensure a more inclusive distribution, and by the composition of Generation Z in Medan.

The data sources used consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants (school and university students), while secondary data came from media documentation, reports from local political observers, records of organizational activities, and direct observations of Generation Z's political behavior in public spaces—both physical and digital. Data collection procedures included interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted semi-structured to accommodate informants' narrative freedom in expressing their experiences and views. Observations aimed to directly examine Generation Z's involvement in political discussions, social actions, and digital literacy practices. Documentation included social media content, political activity posters, and youth organization publications.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2019). Data reduction was carried out by sorting relevant information based on the main research themes. Data presentation used qualitative narratives, reinforced by direct quotes from informants. Data validity was tested through triangulation of sources, techniques, and time to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the findings. In conducting this research, the researchers also adhered to research ethics procedures, such as obtaining informed consent from informants, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring that participation was voluntary and without coercion. This is crucial given that the research involved human subjects, particularly those from a young age group who are vulnerable to social influence. All stages of the research were designed to prioritize the principles of transparency, accountability, and fairness. With this strengthened design, it is hoped that the research will provide a valid and reflective contribution to understanding Generation Z's political literacy and its implications for inclusive and moderate political education in the digital era.

Results And Discussion

Research

Research conducted in the city of Medan shows that most Generation Z has a low level of political literacy. This can be seen from the lack of interest and involvement in following political issues, both through mass media and direct discussion. They tend to stay away from political discussion because they are considered boring, irrelevant, and do not have a direct impact on their lives. Most respondents acknowledge that they are rare or never even follow the development of national politics. They are not accustomed to watching political news, reading articles, or listening to political analysis from credible sources. This is an indication that politics has not become part of their daily information habits.

Interest in political issues only arises when there are viral issues that are widely discussed on social media. The political content they consume is generally in the form of short videos, memes, or news clips shared through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Unfortunately, this information consumption is instant and often inaccurate. Most Generation Z in the city of Medan do not have the habit of exploring or verifying the truth of the political information they receive. They tend to just receive information without questioning the source, context, and truth. This shows the weakness of critical thinking skills, which are one of the main components in political literacy.

The lack of initiatives to explore active political issues is also exacerbated by dependence on social media as the only source of information. They rarely refer to credible media, official government sites, or educational political discussion forums. As a result, the information they receive tends to be piecemeal and not comprehensive. This passive attitude causes them to be easily influenced by popular public opinion. Some respondents even stated that they only followed public opinions so as not to miss the trend, although they did not understand the substance of the issue being discussed. This phenomenon is known as pseudo or pseudo-political engagement.

In some cases, Generation Z in Medan participated in discussing politics just because of the pressure of the environmental environment. They are worried that they are considered not cool if they do not participate in commenting on the issue that is being discussed. This indicates that the motivation of their political involvement is more social than intellectual, without in-depth reflection. This condition is exacerbated by the lack of political dialogue in the family environment. Most respondents mention that political topics are rarely discussed at home. Parents discuss more practical or work matters, while discussions about policies, elections, or political rights are considered as the affairs of adults or political elites.

The school environment does not encourage student political awareness. Citizenship education provided in schools is generally theoretical, relying on memorization, and less touching actual issues. As a result, students feel the lesson is irrelevant to the reality of their lives as young citizens.

However, there are small groups from Generation Z that show a fairly good political literacy. They are active in organizations, following the development of socio-political issues, and are accustomed to discussing in community forums or campus organizations. This involvement encourages them to better understand the democratic system and the importance of active participation in politics. This active group shows that exposure to political activities and an open discussion environment plays a major role in increasing political understanding. Through direct experience in the organization, they learn how the decision making process is carried out, as well as the importance of overseeing public policy critically and responsibly.

Respondents from this group also recognized that they were more selective in choosing information sources. They do not easily believe in information circulating on social media, but always look for valid and balanced references. This forms a critical thinking attitude that is the hallmark of healthy political literacy.

The gap between active groups and passive groups in political literacy shows the need for systemic intervention in political education for Generation Z. Schools, families, and media need to work together in providing a conducive discussion space and educating the younger generation with an approach that suits their character. Political education needed by Generation Z is no longer in the form of one-way lecture, but through an interactive approach such as debate, election simulation, and real case analysis. The use of digital media as a learning tool must also be utilized optimally to reach them effectively.

In general, this field show that the political literacy of Generation Z in Medan is still far from expectations. The lack of active involvement, the dominance of social media as the main source of information, as well as weak support from the family environment and formal education is a big challenge. However, the existence of small groups that are aware and politically active becomes hope in building a critical, participatory, and responsible young generation in the life of Indonesian democracy.

Discussion

Level of Political Literacy Understanding Among Generation Z in Medan City

Political literacy is an important skill for every citizen, including the younger generation, to have in understanding the political system, the decision-making process, and their responsibilities and rights as part of a democratic society (Ilham Mahmud Farikiansyah et al, 2024). According to (Rasyid, 2023), political literacy not

only includes basic knowledge about political structures and actors, but also includes the ability to critically evaluate political information and participate in political life actively and consciously. This literacy is becoming increasingly important amidst the rapid flow of digital information that can influence the political views and behavior of the younger generation.

Based on the results of research conducted in Medan City, it was found that most Generation Z showed a low level of political literacy. Many respondents admitted that they did not actively follow national political developments, either through mass media or direct discussions. This lack of involvement shows that there are still many young people who do not see the importance of understanding political issues that affect their daily lives. They tend to stay away from politics, even considering discussions about political issues as boring and irrelevant.

Furthermore, most of them stated that they only follow political issues that are viral on social media without any effort to explore deeper and more credible sources of information. Their understanding of political issues is often shallow and formed by short content snippets such as videos, memes, or news clips spread on TikTok, Instagram, and other digital platforms. This phenomenon shows that the flow of social media has replaced the role of conventional media and educational institutions in conveying accurate and comprehensive political information.

The lack of initiative to actively explore information is also an indicator of the weak political literacy of Generation Z. Many of them prefer to receive information passively without re-verifying it. This is contrary to the essence of political literacy, which demands critical thinking skills and awareness to assess the truth of the information received. As expressed by Almond and Verba, citizens who have a participatory political culture are those who have adequate political knowledge and participate in the political process, not only as recipients of information, but also as conscious and active subjects (Sumartono, 2018).

On the other hand, political communication patterns among Generation Z also show a tendency towards pseudo-involvement. Several respondents admitted to discussing political issues only because they were afraid of being considered untrendy by their peers, not because they truly understood the issue. This kind of involvement is called pseudo-political engagement, which is superficial participation that is not based on substantial understanding. This shows that social existence in the media is more dominant than intellectual motivation in responding to political issues.

The lack of discussion about politics in the family and social environment also weakens the political literacy of Generation Z. The lack of space for dialogue has weakened the culture of exchanging ideas and building rational arguments regarding policy issues, government, and elections. In fact, in Putnam's view, public

discussion and social interaction are important means of forming collective awareness and fostering citizen participation in political life (Bhakti, 2020).

However, this study also found that there is a small group of Generation Z who show a better understanding of politics. They are active in organizations, follow political news from credible media, and are accustomed to discussing critically. Their involvement in student organization activities or socio-political communities encourages the growth of awareness of the importance of understanding the democratic system and participating in it more meaningfully. This fact is in line with the findings (Abidin et al., 2024) Which emphasizes the importance of participatory spaces in building political awareness among the younger generation.

This low level of political literacy is largely influenced by the weakness of political education, both in the family environment and educational institutions. The lack of an issue-based approach and minimal use of digital media are also obstacles in developing critical and contextual political literacy. This shows that formal education needs to be redesigned to be more contextual and responsive to the needs and characteristics of Generation Z. As stated by (Albary, 2025), that political education will be more effective if developed with an interactive approach, using digital media, simulations, and discussions that place students as active subjects.

Generation Z's political awareness is very important because they are potential voters and future leaders. If they do not have good political literacy, then Indonesia's democratic life will face major challenges, especially in terms of quality participation and rational decision-making. Young people who do not have a strong political understanding will be easily swayed by public opinion that is not necessarily based on facts.

In general, it can be concluded that the political literacy of Generation Z in Medan City is still at a concerning level. The lack of active involvement, the dominance of social media as the main source of information, apathy, and the absence of encouragement from the surrounding environment are the main factors that influence this low level of literacy. However, there are still a handful of individuals who show good potential and can be used as models in strengthening political literacy. Therefore, a comprehensive and cross-sectoral approach is needed to foster a healthy, critical, and active political culture among Generation Z, so that they can carry out their roles as responsible citizens in the Indonesian democratic system.

Generation Z's Views in Medan City in Responding to Identity Politics and Radicalism

Generation Z of Medan City's views on issues of identity politics and radicalism show a diverse spectrum of understanding, with a general tendency to reject both. However, the findings of this study also indicate that this rejection is often not accompanied by a deep conceptual understanding. This causes their attitudes to tend to follow dominant public opinion, rather than the result of critical reflection on the socio-political realities they face.

Conceptually, identity politics is a political strategy that emphasizes the identity of a particular group, such as ethnicity, religion, race, or class, to gain political support or power (Firdaus M. Yunus et al, 2023). In the context of democracy, identity politics can be problematic when group identities are used to exclude other groups, spread hatred, or break up unity. According to Francis Fukuyama, identity politics emerges when individuals or groups feel they are not recognized equally in the public sphere, and then use certain identities as the basis for political struggle (Alosius Gonsaga No & Barnabas Ohoiwutun, 2024). In Indonesia, identity politics often emerges during election momentum, where political campaigns sometimes exploit religious or ethnic sentiments to gain votes.

Meanwhile, radicalism refers to an ideology or movement that wants drastic social and political change, often using extreme methods that are contrary to the principles of democracy and tolerance (Irvan Hidayatullah dan Novan Armansyah, 2021; Hasan, 2024). Radicalism can grow from dissatisfaction with socio-political conditions, then develop into a doctrine that rejects diversity and wants one group to dominate another. According to McCauley and Moskalenko, radicalism usually begins with narratives of injustice and disappointment, then develops into an ideology that separates "us" from "them", until it ends in acts of violence or incitement (Januar Rizal, 2018).

In this context, Generation Z of Medan City generally stated that they disagree with the practice of identity politics or radicalism. They consider both to be able to damage unity and peace in society. However, when asked to explain what is meant by identity politics and radicalism more specifically, many of them were unable to describe the definition, form, or real examples of the two terms. This shows that their understanding is still limited to moral judgment, not to critical socio-political analysis.

Furthermore, most respondents admitted that their information about identity politics and radicalism came from social media. They learned about these terms from video uploads, comments from public figures, or events that went viral on the internet. However, because not all content on social media is educational or based on correct data, the perceptions formed tend to be piecemeal. They know that

both terms have negative values, but do not understand the context, causes, or socio-political dynamics behind them.

In some cases, respondents stated that issues of identity politics or radicalism were not relevant or interesting topics for them. Some even considered discussions about politics as something boring, complicated, or not related to everyday life. This indifference shows that there is a large gap between the formal political world and the daily lives of the younger generation. This is in line with the findings (Hasanah et al., 2022) About passive political culture, where citizens do not feel directly connected to the political process and tend to be spectators.

However, there is also a small portion of Generation Z who have a more critical view of these two issues. They actively discuss in student organizations, attend political seminars, and read more in-depth literature. This group can distinguish between inclusive cultural identities and exclusive identity politics. They also understand how radical narratives can enter through digital spaces or closed communities that they follow. This shows that exposure to healthy information and an open discussion environment can shape better political awareness.

Generation Z's views and understanding of identity politics and radicalism are very important to study because they are a strategic group in Indonesia's demographic map. This generation is a digital generation that grew up in a very fast flow of information, and therefore is easily influenced by viral narratives without having time to clarify or analyze. If their understanding of national issues is not built systematically, they are vulnerable to identity propaganda and radical ideologies that are increasingly spreading through digital platforms.

For this, a more intensive and comprehensive approach to political education and digital literacy is needed. Schools, campuses, and the media must become educational spaces that not only convey information but also encourage critical thinking skills, inter-identity dialogue, and tolerance for diversity. Civic education must go beyond memorizing the country's basic values and begin to enter the realm of discussion practices and reading current issues objectively and analytically.

Efforts to Increase Political Literacy, Combat Radicalism, and Understanding of Identity Politics in Medan City

Increasing political literacy, awareness of the dangers of radicalism, and a correct understanding of identity politics are urgent needs amid Medan City society, especially for Generation Z, who will become important actors in the future of Indonesian democracy. Given that the findings show that the younger generation's understanding of these issues is still relatively low and tends to follow the flow of opinion without in-depth analysis, various integrated strategies are needed that are preventive, educational, and participatory.

One of the main steps in improving political literacy is through formal education that is contextual and critical. The curriculum of civic education, both at the secondary school and university levels, needs to be directed at developing an applicable and reflective understanding of the Indonesian political system. Learning materials should not be limited to memorizing the structure of the state, but should also invite students to analyze current political issues, including how identity politics can divide society or how radicalism can grow in a social space with minimal open discussion.

In addition to classroom learning, project-based approaches and open discussions outside the classroom are essential to creating a critical learning environment. For example, activities such as public debates, election simulations, and dialogue forums between student organizations can be used as a space to hone political thinking skills objectively and based on data. According to Wahid, political literacy will not develop only through one-way lectures, but requires the active involvement of students in understanding the dynamics of society through direct experience.

Mass media, especially social media, which is the main consumption of Generation Z, also play an important role in strengthening or weakening political understanding (Ainiyah et al., 2025). Therefore, there needs to be a structured digital literacy campaign that involves young figures, educational influencers, and literacy communities in Medan City. Local governments and non-governmental institutions can work together with digital platforms to disseminate educational content that explains simply and interestingly about the democratic system, the threat of radicalism, and the importance of inclusivity in national life.

To combat radicalism, preventive efforts need to be strengthened through an approach based on the values of moderation, tolerance, and nationality (Hasan, 2019). Programs such as interfaith dialogue, school-based deradicalization training, and the formation of tolerance ambassadors among school and college students can be effective strategies to fortify the younger generation from extreme narratives. As conveyed by the National Counterterrorism Agency, strengthening the ability to deter radical ideology must start from character education and role models in the closest environment, especially family and school (Zulfikar & Aminah, 2020; Rofiq et al., 2025).

In terms of identity politics, it is important to instill the understanding that diversity is a national treasure that must be preserved. Multicultural education that emphasizes respect for differences needs to be integrated into the education system and media. The younger generation must be encouraged to understand that ethnic, religious, racial, and cultural identities are not to be contested, but to be used as a basis for collaboration and equality. The emphasis on the principle of *Bhinneka*

Tunggal Ika is not enough to be conveyed as a slogan, but must be explained functionally in the life of the nation and state.

In addition to the educational approach, there also needs to be strengthening from the public policy side. The Medan City Government can design a youth training program that integrates political understanding and national insight, including empowering youth organizations and OSIS to become strategic partners in conveying national messages in schools and communities. The involvement of the younger generation in the development planning deliberation forum (musrenbang) or youth legislative activities is also a potential space to foster participatory political awareness.

Furthermore, collaboration between stakeholders is essential in carrying out efforts to improve political literacy and prevent radicalism. Universities, Islamic missionary institutions, creative communities, non-governmental organizations, and government officials must sit together in designing consistent and sustainable activities. This approach not only emphasizes the transfer of information but also the development of critical thinking patterns and a healthy democratic culture.

Regular evaluation and research are also important to determine the effectiveness of the programs being run. With accurate data mapping, related parties can find out which areas, schools, or communities are vulnerable to the penetration of radicalism or the use of identity politics in manipulative schemes. The use of digital technology and online surveys can be used to monitor the perceptions of the younger generation on national issues in real time and dynamically.

Overall, increasing political literacy, combating radicalism, and strengthening the understanding of identity politics in Medan City requires a holistic and sustainable collaborative approach. Generation Z should not be left to face the flow of information alone without being equipped with critical understanding and awareness. If managed well, this generation has great potential to become agents of change who can maintain unity in diversity and become a strong fortress in maintaining the integrity of Indonesian democracy in the future.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis of the views of Generation Z in Medan City, it can be concluded that their level of political literacy is still at a low level. Although some of them show an attitude of rejection of the practice of identity politics and radicalism, the conceptual understanding underlying this attitude has not been fully formed critically and deeply. Their attitudes tend to be shaped by the flow of information on social media, which is instant and shallow, as well as the lack of involvement in substantive political discussions. This indicates that the

political literacy of the younger generation is still heavily influenced by popular public opinion and minimal filtering of academically correct information.

To overcome this problem, structured efforts are needed from various parties, including educational institutions, local governments, youth communities, and mass media, to improve political literacy and national awareness among the younger generation. Applied political education, digital literacy campaigns, and inter-identity dialogue spaces need to be presented consistently to strengthen their understanding of the importance of tolerance, democracy, and diversity. With a sustainable educational and collaborative approach, Generation Z of Medan City is expected to be able to become a generation that is politically intelligent, critical in thinking, and resilient in countering the influence of radicalism and identity-based social segregation.

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