

Political Participation of Millennials and Gen Z: Transformation of Youth Voter Engagement Patterns in Indonesia's Electoral Democracy System

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Abstract

The transformation of Indonesia's political landscape is marked by the emergence of millennials (born 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997-2012) as new political forces reshaping electoral participation dynamics. This study analyzes the political engagement patterns of young voters in Indonesia's democratic system using qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected through surveys of 850 respondents aged 17-40 across five provinces, in-depth interviews with 45 key informants, and social media content analysis. Findings reveal that millennials and Gen Z exhibit distinct participation patterns from previous generations, characterized by digital platform utilization, issue-centric orientation, and skepticism toward traditional political institutions. Results show that 67.3% of young voters prioritize specific issues over party affiliation, 72.8% use social media as their primary source of political information, and 58.4% demonstrate preference for independent or non-partisan candidates. This study identifies three major transformation dimensions: digitalization of political activism, depersonalization of partisan loyalty, and democratization of political information access. The theoretical implications enrich discourse on political participation theory in digital society contexts, while practical implications provide guidance for political elites and democratic institutions in accommodating young voters' aspirations.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's democratic dynamics have undergone significant transformation with the emergence of millennials (born 1981-1996) and Gen Z (born 1997-2012) as increasingly dominant political forces in the electoral landscape. In the 2024 General Election, these two generations are projected to represent nearly 60% of registered voters, making them the most decisive demographic segment in national political contestation (KPU, 2024). This phenomenon marks a fundamental shift in the demographic structure of Indonesian voters, historically dominated by baby boomers and Generation X. This demographic transformation not only impacts the quantitative aspects of political power but also brings profound qualitative changes in how voters interact with the political system, process political information, and express their electoral preferences. The rise of these digital-native generations represents a critical juncture in Indonesian democracy, potentially reshaping the very foundations of political participation and representation.

The unique characteristics of millennials and Gen Z in the context of political participation have become an increasingly important subject of study in contemporary political science literature. Unlike previous generations, these young voters grew up in the digital era, which fundamentally altered how they access, process, and distribute political information (Twenge, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Internet penetration reaching 77.02% in Indonesia in 2023, with 85% of users under 35 years old, has created a new political ecosystem where digital public spaces have become the primary arena for political discourse and mobilization (APJII, 2023). Social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok not only function as communication media but have evolved into alternative political infrastructure facilitating opinion formation, interest aggregation, and articulation of political demands outside traditional institutional mechanisms. This digital transformation has fundamentally challenged conventional models of political communication and engagement, necessitating new theoretical frameworks to understand contemporary political participation.

Theoretical studies on political participation of millennials and Gen Z need to be situated within a broader understanding of democratic transformation in the digital age. Classical political participation theories, such as those proposed by Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) in the Civic Voluntarism Model, emphasize the importance of resources, engagement, and recruitment networks as determinants of participation. However, this framework requires adaptation to accommodate new realities where digital literacy, online networks, and virtual engagement become crucial dimensions of political participation. Furthermore, the concept of "slacktivism" versus "activism" in the digital context raises fundamental theoretical questions about what constitutes meaningful political participation in the social media era (Morozov, 2011; Boulianne, 2019). The debate extends beyond mere technological determinism to encompass broader questions about the quality of democratic engagement, the authenticity of digital activism, and the substantive impact of online political participation on policy outcomes and democratic governance.

Previous empirical research demonstrates complex and sometimes contradictory patterns in youth political engagement. On one hand, there is evidence of declining trust in formal political institutions, decreasing partisan affiliation, and skepticism toward traditional political elites (Dalton, 2017; Foa & Mounk, 2016). On the other hand, studies also identify more intensive forms of non-conventional political participation, such as online activism, petition signing, and issue-based mobilization (Norris, 2002; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). In the Indonesian context, several studies have explored specific aspects of young voter political participation, but significant gaps remain in comprehensive understanding of how this transformation in engagement patterns manifests in actual electoral behavior, particularly in the context of national and local elections. The existing literature provides fragmented insights but lacks systematic analysis of the interplay between digital engagement, issue-based orientation, and electoral outcomes in Indonesia's specific democratic context, characterized by its unique institutional arrangements, political culture, and socioeconomic conditions.

The significance of this research lies in three main dimensions. First, theoretically, this study contributes to the development of a more nuanced analytical framework for political participation in the digital age, particularly by integrating perspectives from generational theory and digital political sociology. By examining the intersection of age-cohort effects, technological transformation, and political culture change, this research advances our understanding of how macro-level societal changes translate into micro-level behavioral patterns. Second, empirically, this research provides comprehensive data on patterns, motivations, and barriers to political participation among Indonesian young

voters, which can enrich the evidence base for policymaking and political strategy. The mixed-methods approach employed allows for both breadth and depth, capturing quantitative trends while also uncovering the nuanced meanings and motivations underlying observed patterns. Third, practically, the findings of this research can provide insights for political actors, civil society organizations, and democracy practitioners in designing more effective engagement strategies with young voter segments. This research also has particular relevance in the context of Indonesian democratic consolidation, where the quality of young generation political participation will determine the sustainability and deepening of democratization processes.

Based on this background, this research aims to answer several key research questions: (1) How do the political participation patterns of millennials and Gen Z differ from previous generations in the Indonesian electoral context? (2) What factors influence the decisions and intensity of young voters' political engagement? (3) How does political digitalization affect the mechanisms and outcomes of electoral participation? (4) What are the implications of this transformation for the quality of democracy and Indonesia's party system? By answering these questions, this research is expected to make substantive contributions to academic understanding and political practice regarding youth participation dynamics in Indonesia's democratic system. The findings will not only illuminate current trends but also provide forward-looking insights into the future trajectory of Indonesian democracy as these generations assume increasingly central roles in political life.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative strategies to develop a comprehensive understanding of millennial and Gen Z political participation. This approach was chosen because the complexity of the phenomenon under study requires triangulation of data and methods to capture both quantitative dimensions of participation patterns and qualitative nuances of motivations and meanings behind political behavior (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). A sequential explanatory design was utilized, where the quantitative component was implemented first to identify general patterns, followed by the qualitative component to explain and deepen quantitative findings. This design allows for the quantitative phase to inform the qualitative sampling and interview protocol development, ensuring that the qualitative inquiry addresses the most salient patterns and anomalies revealed in the survey data.

The quantitative component of the research used a cross-sectional survey of 850 respondents aged 17-40 distributed across five provinces: DKI Jakarta, West Java, East Java, South Sulawesi, and North Sumatra. Location selection was based on geographical representation and variation in demographic-political characteristics, ensuring diversity in urbanization levels, economic development, and political culture. The sampling technique employed stratified random sampling with strata based on age (17-25 years for Gen Z, 26-40 years for millennials), gender, and education level. A structured questionnaire was developed based on validated instruments in political participation literature, with contextual adaptations for the Indonesian setting. Variables measured included: forms of political participation (electoral and non-electoral), sources of political information, partisan orientation, political efficacy, trust in institutions, and use of digital media for political purposes. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, difference tests (t-test and ANOVA), and logistic regression analysis to identify predictors of participation. The survey achieved a response rate of 78.3%, and post-stratification weighting was applied to ensure representativeness.

The qualitative component involved in-depth interviews with 45 key informants purposively selected to represent diversity in young voter profiles. Informants included: student activists (12 persons), young professionals in the private sector (10 persons), young civil servants (8 persons), political content creators (8 persons), and grassroots organizers (7 persons). Semi-structured interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes, focused on in-depth exploration of informants' experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding political participation. The interview guide was developed based on initial survey findings and theoretical literature, with flexibility for probing according to interview dynamics. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Qualitative data analysis employed thematic analysis with an inductive-deductive approach, where an initial coding framework was developed from theory then enriched with themes emerging from the data. NVivo 12 software was used to facilitate coding and analysis. Inter-coder reliability was established through independent coding by two researchers on 20% of transcripts, achieving a Cohen's kappa of 0.82, indicating substantial agreement.

Additionally, this research conducted social media content analysis to identify patterns of political discourse among young voters. Data were collected from Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok using social media analytics tools during a three-month period leading up to the 2024 Election. Keywords used included hashtags related to politics, candidate names, and electoral issues. Analysis was performed on 15,000 posts filtered based on relevance and engagement metrics criteria. Content analysis employed a combination of automated text mining and manual coding to identify frames, sentiment, and dominant narratives in young voters' digital political discourse. Triangulation among survey data, interviews, and social media analysis enabled cross-validation of findings and development of more robust interpretations. The multi-method approach compensates for the limitations inherent in each individual method, providing a more complete and reliable picture of youth political participation.

Ethical considerations of the research included informed consent from all participants, protection of anonymity and data confidentiality, and voluntary participation. The research protocol received ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee. Research limitations that should be noted include: (1) generalization of findings is limited to urban-educated youth population due to sampling frame, reflecting the current demographic reality of most engaged young voters but potentially missing rural and less-educated segments; (2) social desirability bias in self-reported political participation, which we attempted to mitigate through careful question wording and inclusion of behavioral measures alongside attitudinal ones; and (3) the snapshot nature of the cross-sectional design which cannot capture longitudinal dynamics or establish definitive causal relationships. These limitations are acknowledged and considered in the interpretation of findings, and suggestions for future longitudinal research are provided in the conclusion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Electoral Participation Patterns: Shift from Partisan to Issue-Centric Engagement

Survey findings reveal a fundamental transformation in the electoral participation orientation of millennials and Gen Z. A total of 67.3% of respondents stated that they give more consideration to specific issues (such as environment, gender equality, anti-corruption) compared to political party affiliation in determining electoral choices. This pattern contrasts with historical data on previous generation voters where partisan loyalty remained a significant predictor of voting behavior (Ananta et al., 2005). Furthermore, logistic regression analysis shows that issue salience is the strongest predictor of voting

intention ($\beta = 0.542$, $p < 0.001$), while partisan identification shows a non-significant coefficient ($\beta = 0.087$, $p = 0.234$). This finding confirms the hypothesis of partisan dealignment among Indonesian young voters, consistent with global trends of declining party membership and partisan attachment (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). The dealignment is not simply a matter of weakening ties but represents a fundamental reconceptualization of the basis for electoral decision-making, where policy positions and candidate competence trump traditional partisan cues.

Qualitative data from interviews enrich understanding of this issue-centric voting phenomenon. Informants consistently expressed skepticism toward political parties, perceived as "elite cartels" unrepresentative of young generation interests. An informant, a 23-year-old environmental student activist, articulated: "I don't care what party, what matters is the candidate has a real track record on climate action issues. Party is just a label, what matters is the concrete program." This sentiment reflects what Norris (2011) calls "critical citizens" – voters who are politically engaged but skeptical of traditional representation institutions. This pattern has significant implications for political campaign strategies, where issue-based messaging and demonstration of technical competence become more effective than mobilization based on partisan or primordial identities. Political parties and candidates who fail to articulate clear, credible policy positions on issues that matter to young voters risk electoral irrelevance, regardless of their traditional support bases or financial resources.

Digitalization of Political Space: Social Media as Primary Participation Arena

Political digitalization has become a defining characteristic of millennial and Gen Z participation. Survey data reveals that 72.8% of respondents use social media as their primary source of political information, surpassing traditional media (television 18.3%, newspapers 4.2%) and even interpersonal discussion (22.1%). The most popular platforms are Instagram (68.4%), followed by Twitter/X (45.7%) and TikTok (38.9%). More significantly, 56.2% of respondents not only consume but also produce political content on social media, encompassing activities such as sharing articles, making commentary, or creating original political content. This pattern reflects a transformation from passive consumers to active prosumers in the political information ecosystem (Bruns, 2008). The shift has profound implications for political communication strategies, campaign dynamics, and the very structure of political discourse, as information flows become more horizontal, decentralized, and participatory rather than vertical, centralized, and broadcast-oriented.

Social media content analysis identifies several important patterns in young voters' digital political discourse. First, the most engaging political content takes the form of "educational infographics" and "factcheck memes" that present complex information in accessible and shareable visual formats. Second, there is a strong preference for candidate-generated content that appears "authentic" and "relatable," such as behind-the-scenes footage or direct Q&A sessions, compared to political advertising that appears "scripted." Third, hashtag activism and petition signing have become popular forms of low-threshold participation, with some campaigns successfully gathering hundreds of thousands of signatures for issues such as the Mining Law Bill and education reform. However, these findings also raise questions about slacktivism – the extent to which digital participation translates into substantive political efficacy. While online activism may create awareness and demonstrate public sentiment, its conversion into concrete policy outcomes or sustained political mobilization remains an open empirical question requiring further investigation.

In-depth interviews reveal ambivalence in young voters' perceptions of political engagement on social media. On one hand, informants appreciate the democratizing effect

of social media enabling direct access to information and platforms for voice articulation. A 26-year-old political content creator explained: "In the past, we could only be consumers of news from mainstream media. Now we can fact-check ourselves, create counter-narrative content, even go viral until candidates or government must respond." On the other hand, they are also aware of echo chamber effects, misinformation, and polarization intensified by social media algorithms. This critical awareness reflects relatively high digital literacy, but also gives rise to political fatigue and cynicism. Several informants reported deliberately curating their social media exposure or even periodic "digital detox" to avoid information overload and political toxicity. This suggests that while social media has expanded opportunities for political engagement, it has also created new challenges related to information quality, emotional labor, and sustainable participation.

Non-Partisan Candidate Preference and Reimagination of Political Representation

A particularly striking finding is the significant preference for independent or perceived non-partisan candidates. A total of 58.4% of respondents stated they are more likely to vote for candidates who are "not too partisan" or who "can work across party lines." In the context of regional elections, candidates using independent channels or whose backgrounds are non-politicians (such as academics, professionals, or activists) obtained higher favorability ratings compared to career politicians. This phenomenon reflects demand for a new type of political leadership perceived as more meritocratic, technocratic, and accountable. Further analysis shows that candidates' educational background, professional track record, and digital savviness become more salient factors than political seniority or elite connections in evaluating candidate quality. This represents a significant departure from traditional Indonesian political culture, where patron-client relationships, party loyalty, and connections to power structures have historically been paramount in determining electoral success.

Qualitative data explore more deeply the meaning of "non-partisan" in young voters' construction. For them, non-partisan does not always mean candidates who are literally unaffiliated with parties, but rather candidates who demonstrate independence of thought and do not "submit to the party machine." An informant, a young professional in the fintech sector, articulated: "What matters is the candidate has integrity to stick to their principles even if their party says otherwise. If they're just a party rubber stamp, it's pointless." This conception indicates a reimagination of political representation, where legitimacy no longer derives from partisan mandate but from demonstration of competence and alignment with constituent values. This challenges the party-centric representation model dominant in Indonesian political system, and potentially opens space for alternative models such as deliberative representation or advocacy representation. The implications for party organizations are profound, requiring fundamental rethinking of candidate recruitment, internal democracy, and accountability mechanisms to maintain relevance with this emerging electoral base.

Political Efficacy and Trust: The Paradox of Engagement without Institutionalized Participation

This research identifies an important paradox in millennial and Gen Z political orientation: the combination of high sense of political efficacy with low trust in political institutions. The internal political efficacy scale shows a mean score of 3.78 (SD = 0.84) on a 1-5 scale, indicating that young voters feel capable and confident in political understanding and participation. However, trust in political institutions shows much lower scores: political parties (2.12), parliament (2.34), even the General Elections Commission as the election organizing body only 2.89. This contrast indicates that skepticism toward institutions does not necessarily translate into political apathy, but rather drives the search

for alternative channels for political expression. The paradox suggests a sophisticated political consciousness that distinguishes between the capacity for political action (efficacy) and the legitimacy of existing institutional arrangements (trust), rather than a simplistic withdrawal from politics altogether.

Interviews reveal that this distrust is rooted in perceptions of systemic corruption, elite disconnect, and institutional inertia in responding to issues relevant to the young generation. However, rather than withdrawal from politics, the dominant response is engagement through non-institutionalized channels: issue advocacy groups, online activism, community organizing, and volunteer work for NGOs. Some informants are even involved in forming alternative political platforms such as political education collectives or citizen journalism initiatives. This phenomenon resonates with the concept of "engaged outsiders" proposed by Hay (2007) – citizens who are politically engaged but deliberately position themselves outside traditional institutional politics due to disillusionment with the political establishment. This pattern has important implications for democratic quality and institutional reform, suggesting that unless formal institutions adapt to accommodate these alternative forms of participation, there may be a growing disconnect between the vibrancy of civil society activism and the legitimacy of representative institutions.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the findings of this research contribute to several aspects. First, these results reinforce arguments about the necessity to reconceptualize political participation in the digital era. Classical frameworks that distinguish between conventional and unconventional participation need revision to accommodate hybrid forms of participation combining online-offline, individual-collective, and expressive-instrumental elements. The binary categorization of participation modes proves inadequate for capturing the complexity of contemporary political engagement, which often involves simultaneous engagement across multiple platforms and modalities. Second, this research challenges linear narratives about generational change in politics, showing that transformation of participation patterns is not only about age-related differences but also about fundamental shifts in political culture shaped by technological change and socioeconomic transformations. The generational lens, while useful, must be complemented by attention to period effects and cohort-specific historical experiences. Third, findings on issue-centric voting and preference for non-partisan candidates enrich literature on partisan dealignment and realignment, suggesting that in some contexts, erosion of partisan politics is not necessarily followed by emergence of new stable partisan alignments, but potentially represents a permanent state of fluid, issue-based political engagement.

Practically, implications for political actors and democratic institutions are significant. For political parties, these findings indicate urgency for internal reform and renewal of political communication strategies. Rigid partisan branding and hierarchical party structures are increasingly ineffective in mobilizing young voters. Parties need to develop more flexible, issue-based platforms and embrace digital-first communication strategies that prioritize authenticity and two-way engagement. For candidates, investment in building personal brands that demonstrate competence, integrity, and relevance to youth concerns is more important than relying solely on party machinery. For electoral management bodies and civil society organizations, these results show the importance of enhancing critical political literacy regarding misinformation, as well as creating inclusive spaces for youth political participation that accommodate their preferences for digital and non-conventional forms of engagement. Finally, for scholars and observers of Indonesian democracy, this research provides baseline understanding of the political orientation of generations that will increasingly shape the trajectory of Indonesian democracy in coming

decades. Understanding these patterns is essential not only for electoral success but for ensuring the continued vitality and legitimacy of democratic institutions in Indonesia.

4. CONCLUSION

This research confirms that Indonesian millennials and Gen Z are experiencing fundamental transformation in political participation patterns that distinguish them from previous generations. Three main transformation dimensions have been identified: shift from partisan-centric to issue-centric engagement, digitalization of space and mechanisms of political participation, and preference for candidates and forms of representation that are more meritocratic and less institutionally-bound. This transformation is not simply about declining engagement, but more accurately understood as reconfiguration of what constitutes meaningful political participation in the digital democratic context. Young voters possess high sense of political efficacy and willingness to engage, but they articulate this engagement through channels and with orientations that differ from conventional participation models. The findings challenge deficit narratives about youth political apathy, revealing instead a sophisticated and evolving political consciousness that demands new theoretical frameworks and institutional responses.

Implications of these findings are profound for Indonesia's political system. In the short term, political actors capable of adapting to the preferences and orientations of young generations will have significant electoral advantages. In the long term, sustained demographic dominance of millennials and Gen Z will drive structural changes in the party system, institutional practices, and Indonesian political culture as a whole. The quality and sustainability of Indonesian democratic consolidation will be highly dependent on the ability of political institutions to accommodate and channel this generation's aspirations productively. Failure to do so risks not only electoral irrelevance for political establishments, but also potential erosion of democratic legitimacy and increase in political alienation. The stakes are high: successfully integrating young voters' participatory energy and critical engagement could deepen and revitalize Indonesian democracy, while failing to do so could lead to growing cynicism and disengagement with potentially destabilizing consequences for democratic consolidation.

Further research is needed in several areas. First, longitudinal studies to track evolution of political attitudes and behavior of young voters as they age and potentially undergo life-course changes. Understanding whether observed patterns represent stable generational characteristics or age-period effects that may shift over time is crucial for both theoretical understanding and practical strategy. Second, comparative research with other countries in Southeast Asia or the Global South to identify which patterns are universal generational phenomena versus which are context-specific. Cross-national comparison would illuminate the relative importance of technological, cultural, and institutional factors in shaping youth political participation. Third, experimental or quasi-experimental studies to test causal mechanisms underlying the relationship between digital media use and political participation. Fourth, in-depth analysis of the quality and efficacy of different forms of political participation, particularly addressing questions about whether online activism translates into substantive political changes. Finally, research on political socialization processes in the digital age is needed to understand how political identities and orientations form among new generations to come, providing forward-looking insights into the future of democratic engagement in Indonesia and beyond.

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