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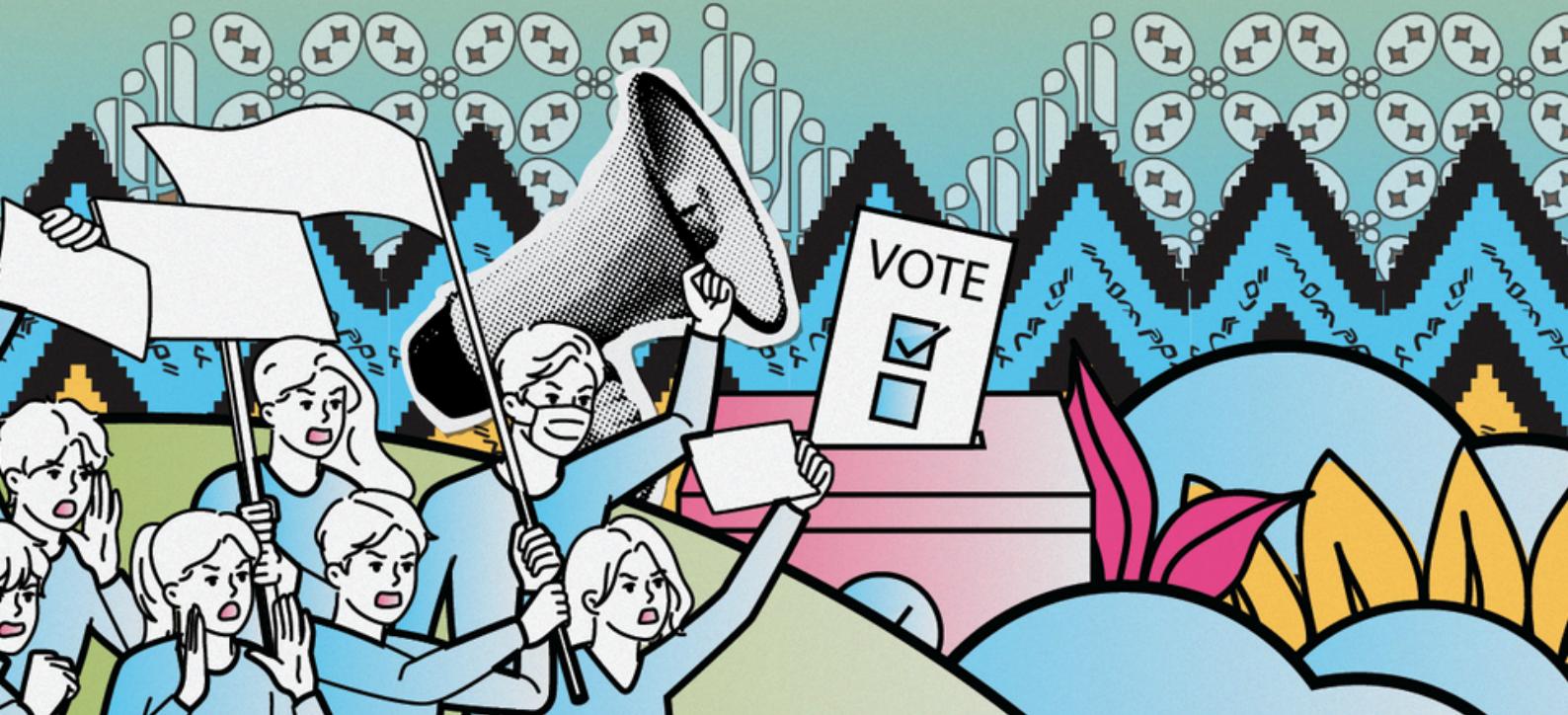
Understanding Youth Engagement and Civic Space in Indonesia

Initiated by Yayasan Partisipasi Muda (Youth Participation Foundation)
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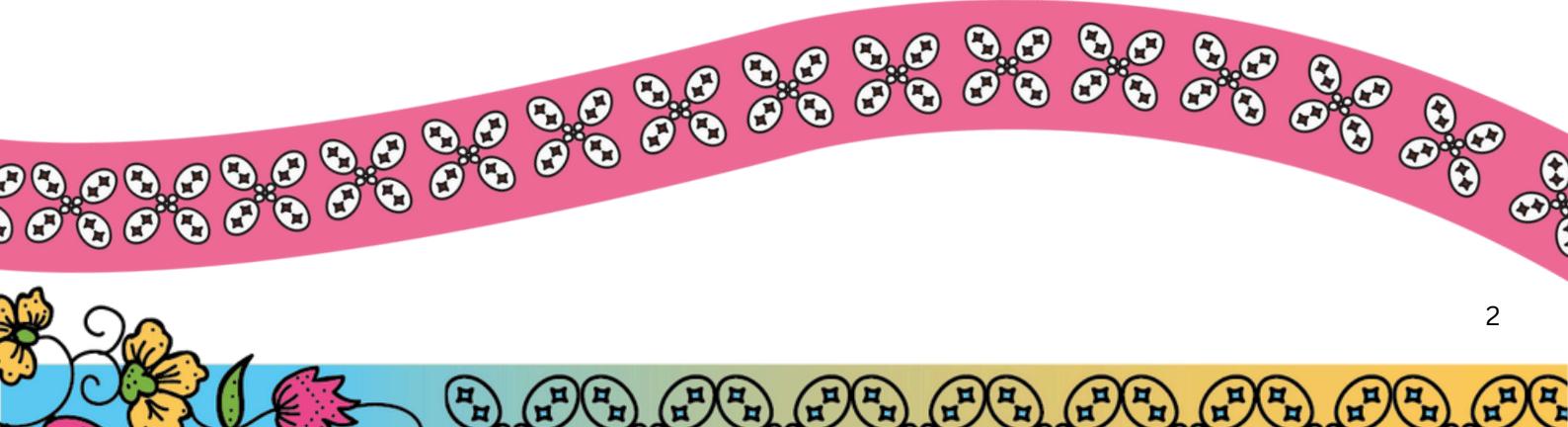
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Acknowledgement

Building a Golden Indonesia is not just about economics or technology. It begins with space. A space that is safe to speak, to be heard, and to disagree. A space where young people can grow, criticize, dream, and take action.

As a youth-led organization born from the grassroots of civil movements, Yayasan Partisipasi Muda (YPM) exists not merely to fill that space—but to disrupt it.

We are here to bring the voices of young people to the heart of political discourse, so youth are no longer seen merely as a demographic bonus, but as key actors in decision-making.

But none of this is possible without a healthy civil space. A space where young people can freely express criticism, ideas, and aspirations without fear. For us, civil space is not just a platform; it is the foundation of a vibrant and inclusive democracy.

Our growing concern over the shrinking of civil space is what compelled us, together with the support of the **Packard Foundation**, to conduct research on how Indonesia's civil space is perceived and experienced by the youth today. This research is more than a contemplation. It is a compass. A guide for us and for other civil society organizations working on civil liberties, to design programs that are impactful and responsive to real needs.

We aim to encourage all stakeholders—from civil society organizations and donors to the government—to be more attuned to the challenges faced by young people and to see the vast opportunities for collaboration to amplify their voices.

If civil space continues to narrow, we will face a domino effect that threatens policy relevance, democratic quality, and our nation's future. In the context of Indonesia's demographic bonus, failing to listen to young voices today is failing to shape Indonesia's tomorrow.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the dedicated research team, the young respondents who shared their experiences, and all the civil society actors who continue to defend and nurture a safe and open civic space in this country. With the spirit of gotong royong, we believe we can ensure that young voices are not just heard—but truly taken into account.

Jakarta, May 16th 2025

Neildeva Despendya Putri
Executive Director of Yayasan Partisipasi Muda

Acknowledgement

We extend our deepest gratitude to **Yayasan Partisipasi Muda** for their generous support of this research. Without their contributions, this project would not have been possible. Special thanks to **Neildeva Despendya, Arief C. Nugraha, Ichsan Fathan**, and many others who provided the organizational and administrative infrastructure that enabled us, as researchers, to focus on the core substantive aspects of this study. We believe that both administrative and substantive elements are equally vital to the success of any research endeavor.

We are also profoundly thankful to the respondents and informants who openly shared their experiences in navigating the challenges of a shrinking civic space. Their stories are both powerful and deeply moving. They revealed not only the complexity of activism but also the courage of those who continue to resist and persist in the face of growing constraints. Their voices reminded us, as researchers, of the privilege and distance we sometimes hold from the very struggles we seek to understand.

Our heartfelt thanks go to the field researchers—**An Nisa Astuti, Andi Nurkhafifah, Dellvin Sergio, and Difa Zahra**—who devoted themselves to collecting these narratives on the ground. Their tireless efforts, both in the field and through weekly discussions, enriched this research far beyond its original design. It has been an honor to work alongside them.

Lastly, we are grateful to **Balqis Shafira, Bella Ananda, Depy Ramandhary, and Zulfa Fauziah** for their diligent transcription of the interviews. Their careful and thorough work formed the foundation of the stories presented in this report. We deeply appreciate their contributions.



Executive Summary

Indonesia has been widely recognized as a country experiencing democratic backsliding, with studies highlighting the decline in civil and political rights (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019; Aspinall, Fossati, Muhtadi & Warburton, 2020). While much of the discussion on democratic erosion focuses on elite-driven political maneuvering, it is equally crucial to examine how these shifts are perceived and experienced by young people. As a generation that will shape the country's democratic future, Indonesian youth play a pivotal role in either reinforcing or resisting these changes (Kwak et al., 2020). This study investigates how young Indonesians (ages 18-25) navigate shrinking civic space, including their perceptions of safe and youth-friendly public spaces, the challenges they face in accessing them, and their views on government responsiveness. By analyzing both politically engaged youth and those outside formal activism, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of how democratic backsliding is lived, interpreted, and resisted at the grassroots level. Additionally, by focusing on young activists, the study sheds light on the strategies they employ to sustain democratic participation amid increasing political constraints.

The quantitative portion of the study is a cross-sectional survey investigating the perspectives of young Indonesians (ages 18-25) on civil space issues. The study examines youth awareness of civil space, perceptions of safety and accessibility, views on government responsiveness, and levels of political and social engagement. Additionally, an experimental component assesses how exposure to information about activist persecution affects youth perceptions and civic engagement. The qualitative portion employs semi-structured interviews with 100 Indonesian civil society activists from well-established and emerging social movement organizations. In the interviews, we inquire the activists' assessment of the current situation; their strategic innovation under democratic backsliding; and their projection of the future of Indonesia's democracy. We interviewed informants who push progressive agenda in four sectors: 1) vulnerable groups, gender and human rights, 2) health and education, 3) environment and natural resources, and 4) inequality, labor and economic empowerment.

The key findings of the quantitative study are as follows:

Respondent Profile

The survey includes 505 respondents aged 18-25 from across Indonesia, with a balanced distribution across Western, Central, and Eastern regions. The majority of respondents are students (66.3%), and higher education attainment is prominent—44.8% hold a bachelor's degree. Female respondents outnumber males in all regions, with the highest gender disparity seen in the Central region. A notable share of respondents identify as non-binary or chose not to disclose their gender, especially in the West.



Media and Internet Use

Indonesian youth are highly digitally connected: over 80% report using the internet for more than three hours daily, with usage increasing slightly on weekends. WhatsApp (91.5%), Instagram (89.1%), and TikTok (62.2%) are the most favored platforms, while Facebook and Twitter (X) are generally unpopular. Instagram and website-based news sources are the most frequently used for political updates, though traditional media like TV and radio still maintain a significant user base. Peer networks also play a critical role in political discussions.

Awareness and Perception of Civic Space

Understanding of “civic space” varies with activism experience: 67.1% of respondents involved in civil society organizations demonstrate familiarity with the term, compared to significantly lower awareness among non-participants. Nearly half of all respondents (47.3%) define civic space as encompassing legal protections, physical and digital space for expression, and freedom of assembly and association. Regional differences are clear: Western Indonesia exhibits the highest concern about civic space restrictions (40.9%), while Eastern Indonesia shows greater optimism, with 37.5% perceiving civic space as more open.

Challenges in Accessing Civic Space

The most widely reported barrier is fear of expressing opinions online (73.4%), followed by harassment during peaceful assemblies (36.4%) and a lack of government protection (42%). Structural barriers such as limited resources, discrimination, and group restrictions also inhibit access. Despite this, youth overwhelmingly identify freedom of expression (75.6%) and freedom to gather peacefully (59%) as critical for a safe and youth-friendly civic environment.

Perceptions of Government Responsiveness

Youth express the highest dissatisfaction with government performance in reducing inequality (61.4%), expanding economic opportunities (58.6%), and addressing poverty (58.0%). Conversely, more favorable evaluations are given in areas such as healthcare (33.7%) and food security (28.1%). Regional patterns persist: youth in Western Indonesia are the most critical across sectors, while Central Indonesia offers more balanced assessments, and Eastern Indonesia exhibits greater ambivalence with a mix of neutral and positive responses.

Experimental Findings

- **Perception of Elites:** Exposure to information about repression significantly reduces trust in national and local elites, particularly in Western Indonesia ($p = 0.034$), while having negligible or even reversed effects in Eastern regions.
- **Commitment to a Cause:** Prior activism experience is the most consistent predictor of resource commitment to social or political causes. Exposure to repression-related information has no significant effect on willingness to invest time, money, or energy.



- **Willingness to Engage in SMOs:** Past engagement in activism remains the strongest predictor of future participation in civil society organizations. Learning about repression does not significantly increase civic engagement among those with no prior activism history.

The key findings of the qualitative studies are as follows:

- **Awareness of shrinking civic space**
 - Our interviews found that there is a variety of understandings of what is considered a civic space among Indonesian youth activists. Some activists believe that they need to be more cautious in interacting with the government.
 - In contrast, some of our interviews also document activists who do not feel that their civic space is threatened. Activists in this group see that there are no concerning risks to their works, so they feel that shrinking civic space is something distant to them.
 - The activists point out that shrinking civic space stems from the behaviors of politicians which sabotage and undermine democratic institutions (e.g., elections, mass media).
- **Needs and expectations**
 - Our interviews reveal that the activists acknowledge various conditions that they feel necessary for keeping their activism vibrant under duress.
 - Some of the activists argue that political space is required for preserving their activism while others opine for a stronger unity from civil society organizations in facing shrinking civic space.
- **Government responsiveness**
 - The activists have different perceptions regarding the government's responsiveness. Some activists perceive that the government often dismisses their demands. They see the government does not want to engage with them and accommodate their demands.
 - Other activists perceive that the government can still be responsive to the activists' demands. These activists believe that even though there are bureaucratic hurdles, they can still expect to influence public policy-making.
- **Strategies for fighting shrinking civic space**
 - Our interviews, however, recorded how Indonesian youths are still persistent in pushing their agenda although they have different ideals regarding tactics that they should apply. Some of these youth activists focus on expanding their social base.
 - They enlarge their social base by weaving new networks and collaborating intensively with youths, the main supporter of our interviewee's organizations.
 - Other activists favor mass mobilization as the main strategy to press the government. They believe that mass mobilizations of people from different sectors can influence the government's policy-making.

Addressing Key Goals

This study provides valuable insights that contribute directly to understanding and addressing core challenges related to civic space in Indonesia:

Assess Awareness of Shrinking Civic Space:

Awareness of “civic space” remains uneven among Indonesian youth. While 67.1% of those engaged in civil society organizations demonstrate familiarity with the concept, non-participants show significantly lower levels of understanding. Nearly half of all respondents (47.3%) define civic space comprehensively, associating it with freedom of expression, assembly, association, and state accountability. Regional disparities are pronounced: Western Indonesia shows the highest concern over shrinking civic space (over 40% perceive it as more restricted), while Eastern Indonesia expresses more optimism, viewing civic space as relatively open. Qualitative interviews confirm that activists hold divergent views—some perceive growing threats and adopt cautious strategies, while others do not feel directly affected. Nonetheless, many link shrinking civic space to state-led actions that erode democratic institutions and restrict civil liberties.

Understanding Safe & Youth-Friendly Civic Space:

Respondents consistently identified freedom of expression (75.6%) and the right to gather peacefully (59%) as the most essential elements of a youth-friendly civic space. The most common barrier to civic participation is fear of online retaliation or harassment (73.4%), followed by intimidation during public gatherings (36.4%) and lack of institutional protection (42%). These concerns reflect both the digital and offline challenges young people face in asserting their rights.

Mapping Provincial Challenges:

Youth perceptions vary widely across Indonesia’s regions. Western Indonesia reports the highest dissatisfaction with government performance and the strongest perception of shrinking civic space. Central Indonesia shows a more balanced view, while Eastern Indonesia presents a mixed picture—combining moderate optimism about civic openness with concerns about government effectiveness in addressing socioeconomic needs. These regional dynamics highlight the importance of locally tailored civic initiatives.

Government Responsiveness to Youth Issues:

Youth give the lowest ratings to government performance in areas tied to economic justice: inequality (61.4%), job opportunities (58.6%), and poverty reduction (58.0%). By contrast, healthcare access (33.7%) and food security (28.1%) are viewed more positively. Interviews reveal a spectrum of activist perspectives: some see the government as unresponsive or incompetent, while others remain hopeful, engaging in lobbying and leveraging informal channels to influence policy. This divide often depends on issue area, regional governance, and the level of bureaucratic cooperation.



Identifying Needs & Expectations for Strengthening Civic Space:

Youth expect civic space to be safeguarded through stronger protections from harassment, greater legal guarantees of rights, and institutional support for activism. Over half (52.8%) cite a lack of government transparency as a major issue. Interviews reveal that some activists advocate for legal reforms and political space, while others call for stronger solidarity among civil society organizations to resist repression. Youth-led strategies often prioritize collective resilience, innovation, and movement-building over reliance on state guarantees alone.

Identifying Forms of Youth Engagement:

Participation in social movements remains gendered: 69.1% of male respondents report engagement, compared to lower levels among women and non-binary youth, who may face higher social or structural barriers. Online civic discourse is common—43.6% of youth discuss political and social issues occasionally on social media, while 22% do so frequently. Activists use diverse strategies: some focus on expanding their base through youth organizing and coalition-building, while others engage in ideological education or mass mobilization to influence policy outcomes.

Developing Digital Communication Strategies:

Social media is central to youth civic life. WhatsApp (91.5%), Instagram (89.1%), and TikTok (62.2%) are the most popular platforms, reflecting a strong preference for visual and interactive content. Text-based platforms like Facebook and Twitter (X) are losing relevance among youth audiences. Effective digital engagement should prioritize these high-use platforms and partner with youth-facing influencers already involved in advocacy. Content strategies should emphasize storytelling, authenticity, and participatory formats to boost civic awareness and mobilization.

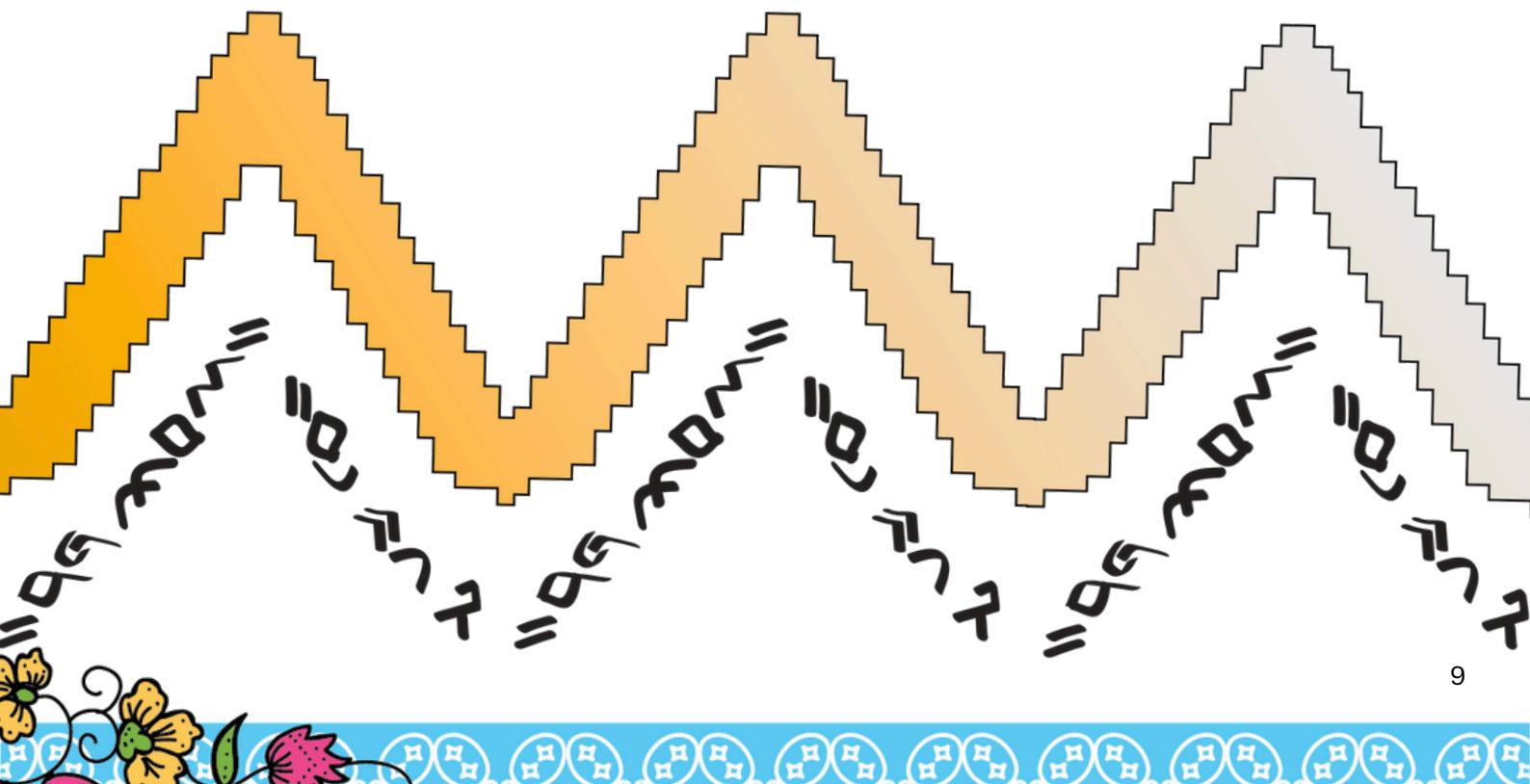


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Introduction

In recent years, Indonesia has faced increasing concerns over democratic backsliding, characterized by the weakening of democratic institutions, restrictions on civil liberties, and shrinking civic space. Scholars have documented how state-led actions have eroded key democratic principles, limiting the ability of individuals and civil society organizations to freely associate, assemble, and express opinions (Bermeo, 2016; Civicus, 2022, Warburton & Aspinall, 2019; Aspinall et al., 2020). International assessments reflect these trends, with Indonesia classified as "partly free" by Freedom House (2024) and labeled a "flawed democracy" by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023). This decline has direct implications for civic engagement, particularly for youth, who constitute the largest demographic group and play a critical role in shaping the country's democratic future.

This study examines how young Indonesians (ages 18-25) navigate shrinking civic space, with a particular focus on youth activists. We understand civic space as a realm that allows citizens to advance their interests. Three basic rights underpin civic space: the freedom of assembly, association and expression (Civicus 2024). The state is responsible to guarantee these rights so that citizens can advance their interests. When the state cannot guarantee these rights, citizens do not have a realm to promote their interests. When this realm is too narrow, concerns' over, for instance, basic needs (e.g., education, food) cannot emerge and transform into policies. Thus, the existence of civic space assists not only citizens to express their concerns but also allows the state to identify citizens' pressing problems that require swift responses.

In this study, we seek to explore Indonesian youths' awareness of civic space, their perceptions of safety and accessibility, their views on government responsiveness to youth-related issues and their strategies to counter the shrinking civic space. Our emphasis is on the perception of youth activists on multiple dimensions of civic space (i.e., the freedom of assembly, association, and expression). We examine their perceptions because we seek to go beyond the traditional understanding of civic space that rely on the assessment of, for instance, other monitoring organizations (e.g., Civicus) or reports produced by civil society organizations. We aim to understand how civic space is lived, interpreted, and challenged at the grassroots level, especially by the activists. Our approach also focuses on the experience of Indonesian youths because youths' support to democracy signals the quality of democracy (Kwak et. al., 2020). Given the central role of digital platforms in civic engagement, the study also examines how online spaces shape youth activism and political participation amid increasing restrictions.

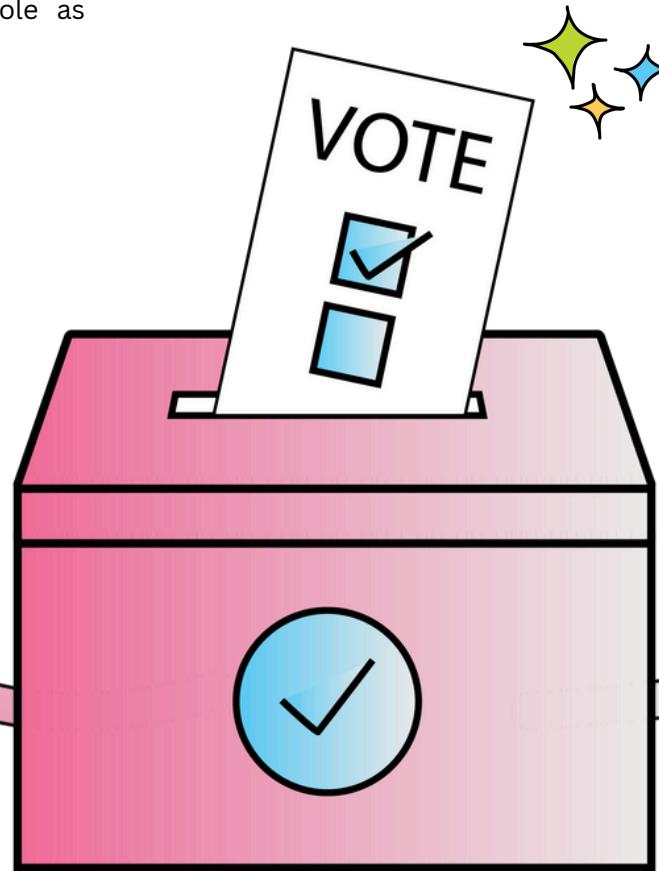
To achieve these objectives, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a cross-sectional survey with in-depth interviews. The survey captures the perspectives of a diverse sample of young Indonesians across different regions, while the qualitative component delves deeper into the lived experiences of youth activists navigating civic space restrictions. Additionally, an experimental component assesses whether increased awareness of activist persecution influences youth attitudes toward civic space and their willingness to engage in social movements.



By integrating these approaches, the study captures both broad trends and individual narratives, offering a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing young activists.

This study argues that young people's engagement with civic space is shaped not only by structural constraints but also by their perceptions of political opportunities and risks. While shrinking civic space imposes significant challenges, youth activists develop adaptive strategies to sustain their activism, ranging from network expansion and alliance-building to leveraging digital platforms for mobilization. Furthermore, regional disparities in civic space perceptions highlight the need to consider localized political contexts in analyzing youth engagement. By centering youth agency in discussions on democratic erosion, this study challenges the dominant narrative that portrays young people as passive recipients of political change and instead underscores their role as active participants in shaping civic space.

This study contributes to the discourse on democratic backsliding by shifting the focus from elite-driven political processes to the agency of youth activists in shaping civic space. It highlights how civic space restrictions affect young people differently depending on their level of activism, regional context, and digital media engagement. Furthermore, the research informs discussions on digital communication strategies by providing insights into how online platforms can be leveraged to sustain youth-led movements. The findings offer practical recommendations for SMOs, policymakers, and digital platforms to strengthen youth participation and safeguard civic space in Indonesia.



Research Strategies

This study adopts a concurrent mixed methods design, in which the quantitative and qualitative components were conducted independently yet simultaneously. Rather than treating the qualitative portion as a follow-up or deep dive into the survey results, both strands were designed to stand alone while providing complementary insights. Thus, the approach is not meant as triangulation in the traditional sense but reflects a logic of complementarity, where each method explores different dimensions of the same phenomenon—youth perceptions and experiences of civic space in Indonesia.

The quantitative survey, including an embedded experimental component, captures broad trends and causal relationships at scale, while the qualitative interviews offer depth and contextual nuance drawn from the lived experiences of activists. Although developed independently, the two strands interact analytically throughout the paper, with the survey mapping general patterns and the interviews helping to interpret those patterns—highlighting areas of alignment, divergence, and complexity in youth civic engagement across different regions and sectors. This integrated interpretation strengthens the overall analysis by capturing both structural patterns and subjective meanings within a dynamic civic landscape.

Quantitative Study

Study Design and Methodology

This study employs a cross-sectional survey with an integrated experimental component to explore the perspectives of young Indonesians (ages 18-25) on civil space issues. In the survey, civic space is operationalized as the extent to which there is (1) respect for the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly, and expression in policy, law, and practice; (2) a space where the state protects fundamental rights such as association, assembly, and expression; (3) public areas where individuals can gather for social, political, or cultural activities; (4) an environment in which citizens can freely engage in discussions and express diverse opinions; and (5) the freedom to speak out, criticize the government, and express aspirations through social media and other media platforms. The survey captures respondents' awareness of civil space, their perception of safe and youth-friendly public spaces,

challenges they face in accessing these spaces, and views on government responsiveness to youth-related issues. Additionally, it examines youth interest in social movements, political engagement, and perceptions of political elites. The study utilizes non-probability convenience sampling, with participants recruited through online platforms such as social media and email. Of the 919 responses collected, only 505 observations are included in the analysis, as only those within the target age group were considered. Data collection is conducted from November 2024 to March 2025.



To assess the impact of increased awareness on youth perceptions, an experimental intervention is incorporated. Participants are randomly assigned to either a control group or an intervention group. The intervention group receives a brief informational prompt detailing recent cases of activist persecution in Indonesia before answering related survey questions. This design enables comparisons between the two groups to evaluate how awareness of activist persecution influences perceptions of civil space, political elites, and willingness to participate in social movements.

Data Analysis and Limitations

Survey data is analyzed using R, employing descriptive statistics to summarize demographic characteristics, media exposure, and baseline awareness of civil space issues. Comparative analyses, including t-tests and ANOVA, assess differences between control and intervention groups, while regional comparisons identify variations in perceptions and engagement across different parts of Indonesia. Regression analysis explores relationships between factors such as media exposure, regional background, and awareness of civil space issues. Data visualization techniques, including lollipop charts, stacked bar charts, and dot charts, present engagement levels in social and political discussions on social media.

Data collection is conducted via Qualtrics to ensure broad accessibility, with the survey designed for completion within 10-15 minutes to encourage participation. Ethical approval has been sought from the Ethics Committee at Universitas Atmajaya, and all participants provide informed consent to ensure anonymity and voluntary participation.

However, limitations exist due to the reliance on convenience sampling, which may restrict generalizability. Convenience sampling involves selecting participants based on their accessibility rather than random selection, making it a quick and cost-effective approach but potentially introducing biases. Additionally, self-reported data can be subject to social desirability bias, particularly in responses concerning political engagement and government perceptions. Despite these limitations, the inclusion of an experimental component strengthens the study by providing valuable insights into how awareness of activist persecution shapes youth perspectives on civic space.

Qualitative Strategy

Study Design and Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Prior to the interviews, consent forms and a brief survey were distributed to gather background information on informants and their organizations.

The survey collected details such as the organization's name, location, key influences that motivated the informant's activism, and the resources available to their organization. This preliminary data provided essential context for the interviews and allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the activists' experiences and perspectives.

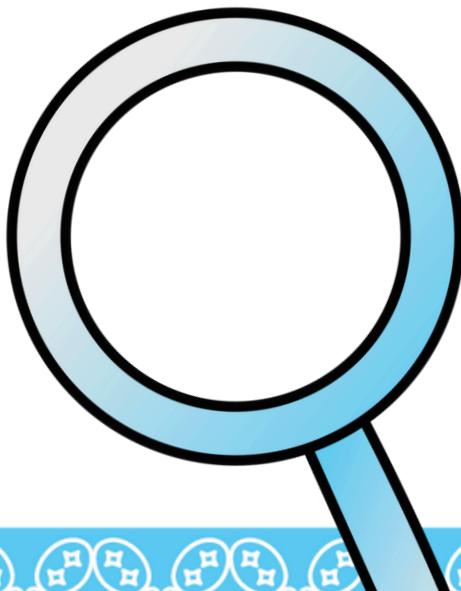


The semi-structured interviews explored how social movement activists navigate democratic backsliding. Grounded in the political process approach, the interviews focused on key themes, including activists' perceptions of democratic decline, shrinking civic space, organizational strategies, political opportunities, and internal organizational capacity. A total of 15 interview questions were designed to address these themes. The study included activists from both well-established organizations (operating for over ten years) and emerging organizations (less than ten years old). Comparing their experiences provided insights into how different organizational infrastructures—such as resource availability, networks, and membership size—shaped their strategies in responding to democratic challenges.

To ensure a diverse range of perspectives, informants were divided into two groups: leaders from established social movement organizations and young activists (ages 18-25) from emerging organizations. The selection process considered geographic representation (Western, Central, and Eastern Indonesia), sectoral diversity, and gender balance. Interviews were conducted between December 2024 and February 2025, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. In addition to interviews, relevant secondary sources, including media reports and official documents from civil society organizations, were analyzed. The data was examined using thematic analysis (Riger & Sigurvinssdottir, 2016), categorizing responses into conceptual themes to identify the various strategies activists employed to sustain their movements amidst democratic backsliding.

This study managed to collect 100 interviews with activists from four social movement sectors: 1) vulnerable groups, gender, and human rights, 2) health and education, 3) environment and natural resources, and 4) inequality, labor, and economic empowerment. The activists represent various positions across different issues. In the issue of trust to government, for instance, some activists present a low level of trust to the government while others still see the government as their strategic partner. Our interview data demonstrates such a variety across issues that portrays the diversity of Indonesian youth activists' perceptions.

Furthermore, 53% of our informants are men, 40.7% are women, 4.7% are non-binary, and 1.2% chose not to reveal their gender. 26.7% of the informants reported high school as their highest level of educational attainment while **the bulk of the informants (60.5%) had undergraduate degree**. Only 11.6% of the informants who have post-graduate certificate. Furthermore, the informants represent organizations with different backgrounds. 58.1% of the informants' organization have a legal status while the rest are still informal organizations (41.9%). More than half (60.5%) of the organizations reside in Java and Bali. 62.8% of the organizations have an annual budget less than IDR 250 million while only 14% of the organizations which operate with a budget more than IDR one billion.



Data Analysis and Limitations

Thematic analysis is the main strategy to analyze the interview data. Interviews data are transcribed and coded based on relevant key theoretical categories. We focus in analyzing several key categories such as the awareness of Indonesian youth of shrinking civic space, their awareness of need and support required to maintain their activism, the possibility of cooperating with the government, and their strategies to fight against shrinking civic space. We classified the interview data into these categories and analyzed them based on the similarities and differences among informants' statements. What we examined in each category was the pattern of answers given by informants.

Once we coded the data and examined their variety, we selected interviews that represent the variety of answers given by informants. We also selected interviews that complement the quantitative findings by choosing the data that not only represented a variety of interviewees' arguments but also the data provided nuance to the quantitative findings. The limitation of this method of analysis, is however, it cannot provide a comprehensive nuance to the quantitative data. The thematic analysis suggests that the inference based on the quantitative data might miss some stories from the point of view of the activists.



Profile of Indonesian Youth in the Survey



Age distribution

The age distribution of respondents is relatively balanced across the 18 to 25 age range, with some variations. The largest group of respondents is 25-year-olds, accounting for 16.4% of the sample, followed by 23-year-olds at 15.2%. The youngest group, 18-year-olds, represents the smallest share at 10.7%. This pattern indicates that older youth within the eligible age bracket were more engaged in the survey, suggesting a trend where civic participation may increase with age.

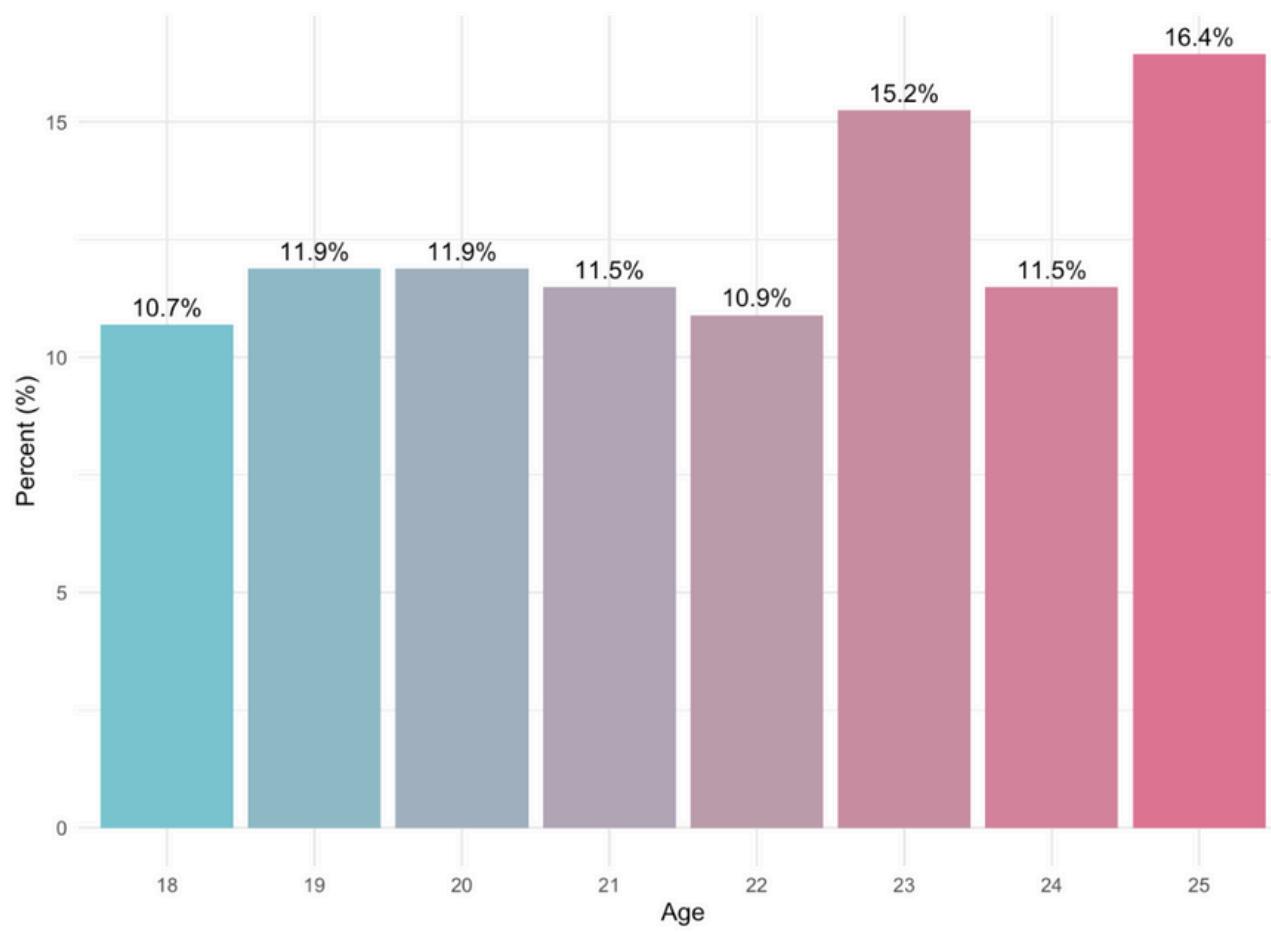
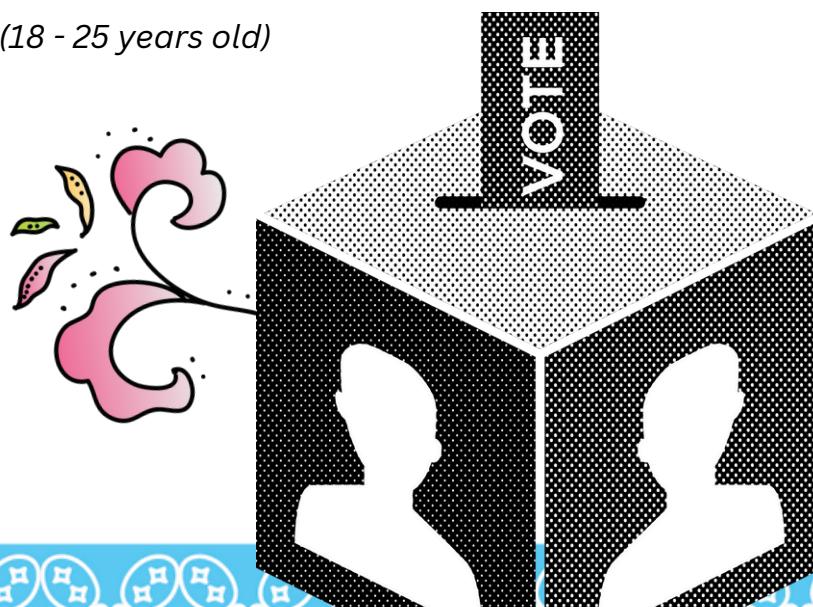


Table 1 - Age Distribution (18 - 25 years old)



Gender Distribution

The gender distribution of respondents varies across different regions in Indonesia. In the Central region, females make up the majority with 61.9%, followed by males at 34.9%, and 3.2% of respondents choosing "Prefer not to say". The East region shows a more balanced distribution, with 52.8% identifying as female and 45.1% as male. A small percentage identified as "Other" (0.7%) or selected "Prefer not to say" (1.4%). In the West region, which has the largest sample size, 55.4% of respondents are female and 39.9% are male. Additionally, 1.4% identify as non-binary, 0.3% as "Other," and 3% chose "Prefer not to say." This distribution indicates that female respondents remain more represented across all regions, especially in the Central and West, while the presence of non-binary and gender-diverse individuals is most notable in the West region.

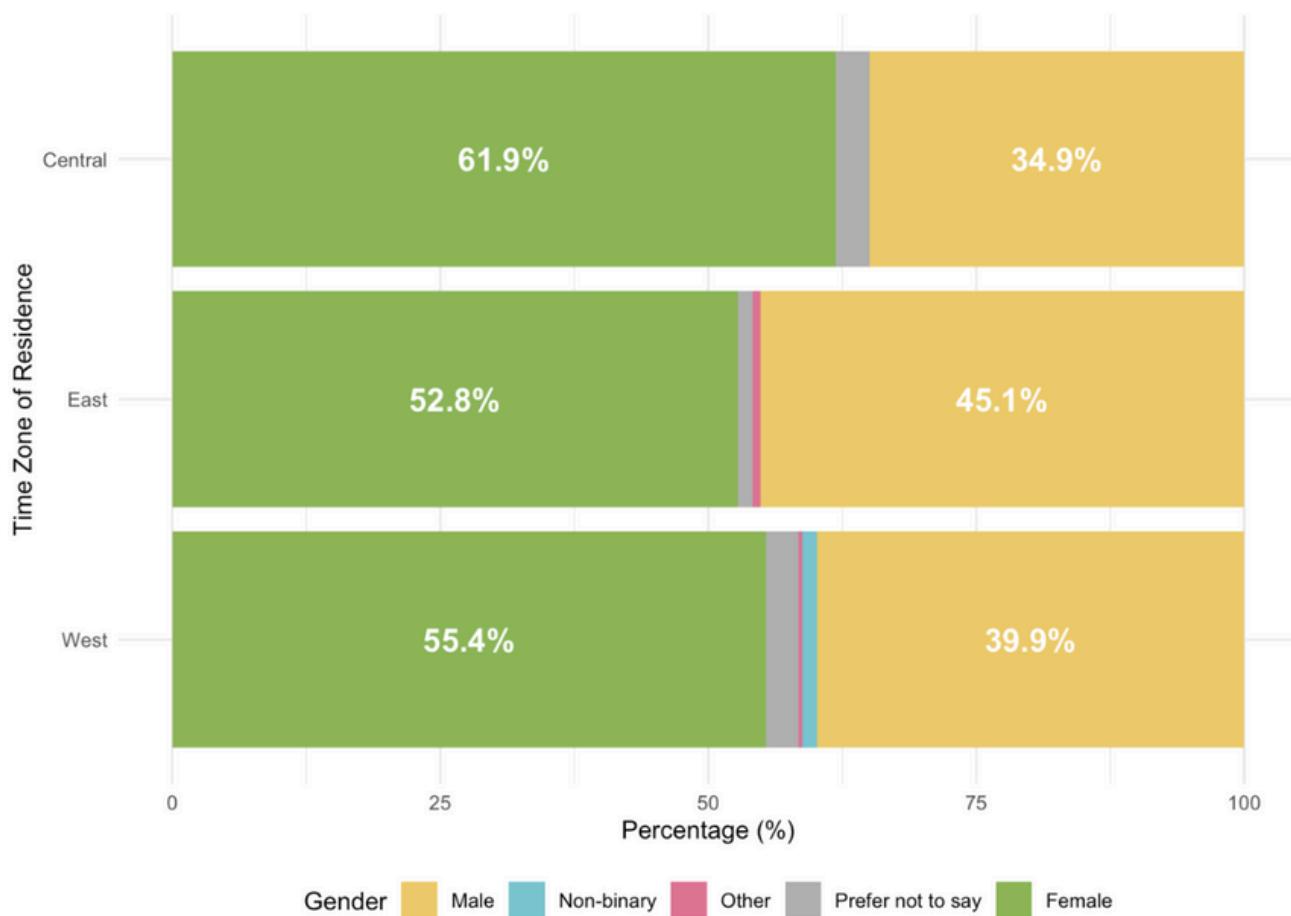


Table 2 - Gender Distribution by Time Zone Residence

Educational Levels

The majority of respondents in this survey have completed high school, accounting for 49.1% of the sample, making it the most common education level among participants. A significant proportion, 44.8%, hold a bachelor's degree (S1 or D4), indicating a relatively high level of educational attainment among the surveyed youth. Smaller segments of the sample include vocational education graduates (3.2%) and middle school graduates (2%). Only 0.8% of respondents have completed postgraduate education (S2 or S3), while primary school graduates make up just 0.2% of the sample. These results suggest that most participants have at least a high school diploma, with a strong representation of higher education, reflecting the growing accessibility of tertiary education among Indonesian youth.

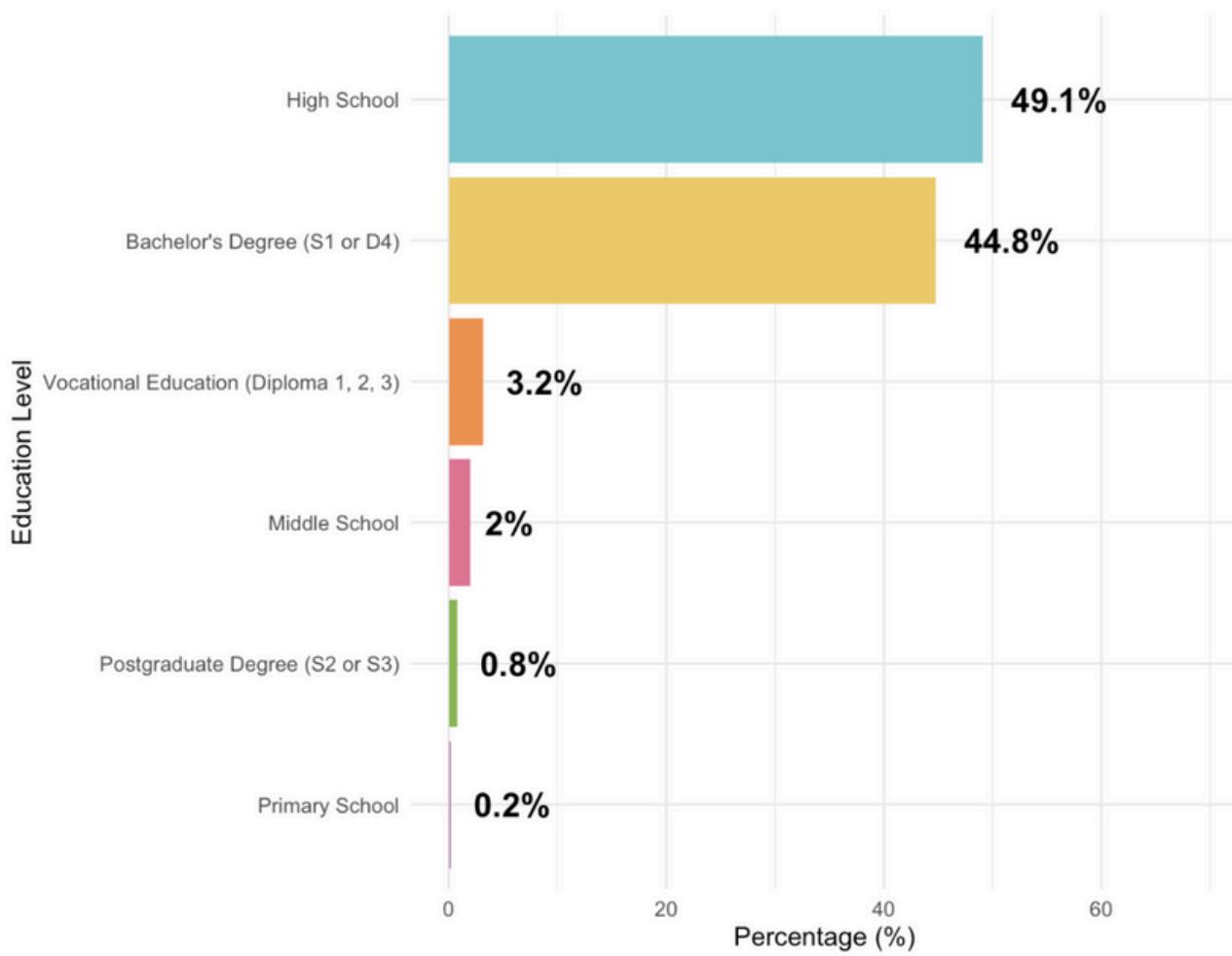
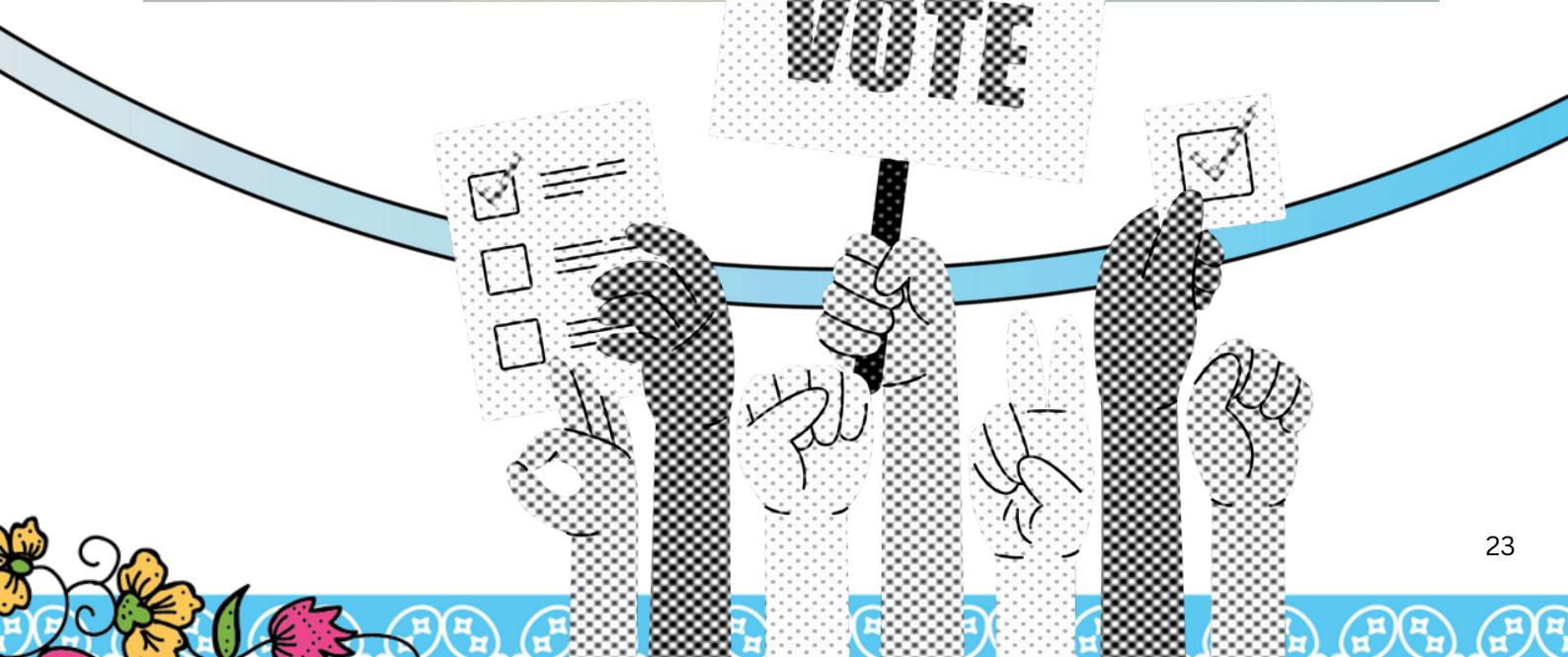


Table 3 - Respondents' Education Level

Occupation

The majority of respondents (66.3%) are students, indicating that most participants are currently engaged in formal education. A smaller but notable share are employed in the private sector (10.1%) or are unemployed (9.5%). Additionally, 5.9% work for non-profit organizations, reflecting a degree of involvement in civil society. Entrepreneurs account for 3.6% of the sample, while government employees make up only 0.8%, the smallest occupational group. Another 3.8% of respondents fall under the "Other" category. These findings suggest that the survey predominantly captures the perspectives of students, a key demographic in shaping civic discourse and future civic engagement.



Youth Media Consumption



Leisure and Social Media Use

The data reveals clear differences in how young people allocate their time for leisure and social media between weekdays and weekends. On weekdays, leisure time is more constrained: 17.1% of respondents spend 1–2 hours on leisure, 12.6% spend 3–4 hours, and only 9.5% report more than 6 hours of leisure activity. In contrast, weekends show a marked increase in free time, with 25% of respondents spending over 6 hours on leisure activities, while another 12.4% spend 3–4 hours.

Social media usage follows a similar but more gradual shift. On weekdays, 16.3% of respondents use social media for 1–2 hours, 10.1% for 3–4 hours, and 8.9% for more than 6 hours. On weekends, the proportion of those spending more than 6 hours online increases to 17.4%, nearly doubling the weekday figure. Mid-range usage (1–4 hours) also remains substantial.

These trends suggest that young people experience greater time flexibility on weekends, allowing them to engage more extensively in both leisure and digital activities. Weekdays remain more structured, likely due to academic or work responsibilities, leading to more limited discretionary time.

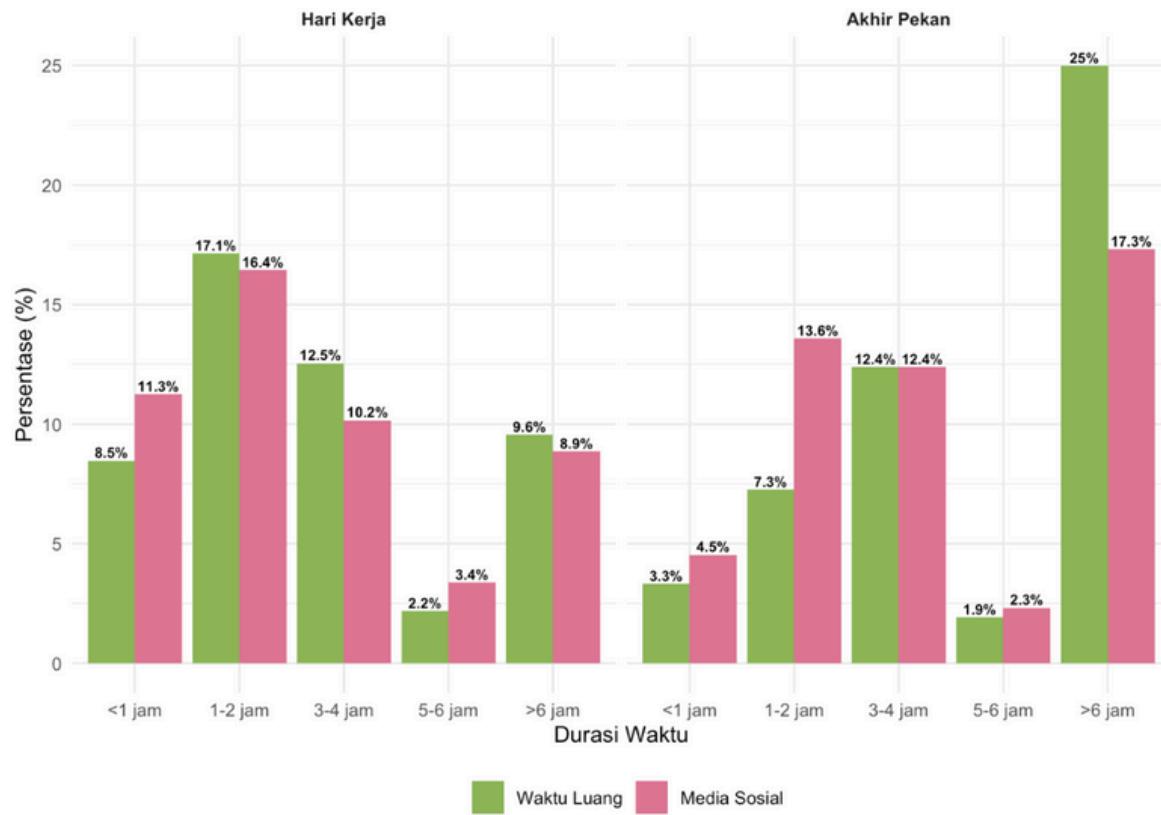


Table 4 - Comparison of Free Time and Social Media Usage

Age Group and Internet Use

Internet usage among respondents shows a clear trend: younger participants display more varied habits, while older respondents lean toward prolonged daily use. Among 18-year-olds, 55.6% report using the internet for more than five hours per day. This share increases with age, reaching 59% by age 25, and peaking even higher at 66.7% among 19-year-olds. The 3–5 hours per day category also remains significant, particularly among 20 to 24-year-olds, and reaches its highest point at 39% for 23-year-olds.

Shorter daily usage is less common. The proportion of respondents using the internet for only 1–2 hours per day begins at 16.7% among 18-year-olds and steadily declines to 7.2% by age 25. Infrequent internet use is rare: those using it only several times a week range between 0% and 3.9%, and those who rarely use it hover around 1–2%, with a slight spike to 5.5% at age 22.

These findings highlight how deeply integrated internet use is in the daily lives of Indonesian youth. Across all age groups, over 80% of respondents spend at least three hours online every day, reflecting the central role of digital platforms for communication, information access, and entertainment.

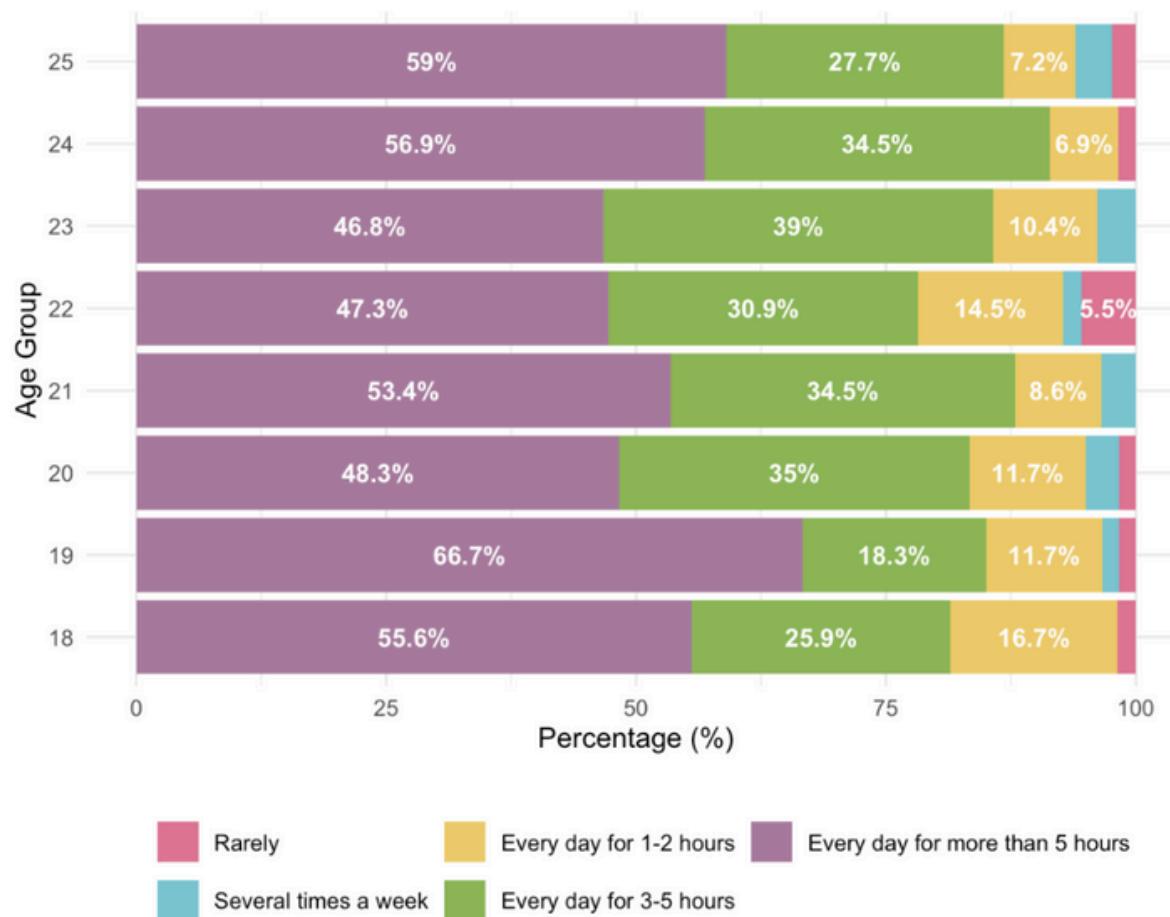


Table 5 - Internet Usage Distribution by Age Group

Social Media Preference

WhatsApp and Instagram emerged as the most favored social media platforms among respondents, with 91.5% preferring WhatsApp and 89.1% favoring Instagram. TikTok also received majority support, with 62.2% of respondents identifying it as a preferred platform. In contrast, Facebook and Twitter (X) were the least favored, with 88.1% disliking Facebook and 84.2% expressing similar views toward Twitter (X). YouTube received more mixed feedback—while 29.5% of respondents considered it a preferred platform, a notable 70.5% indicated they did not favor it. These patterns suggest that Indonesian youth tend to gravitate toward platforms centered on messaging and visual content, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, while text-heavy or legacy platforms like Twitter (X) and Facebook are falling out of favor among this demographic.

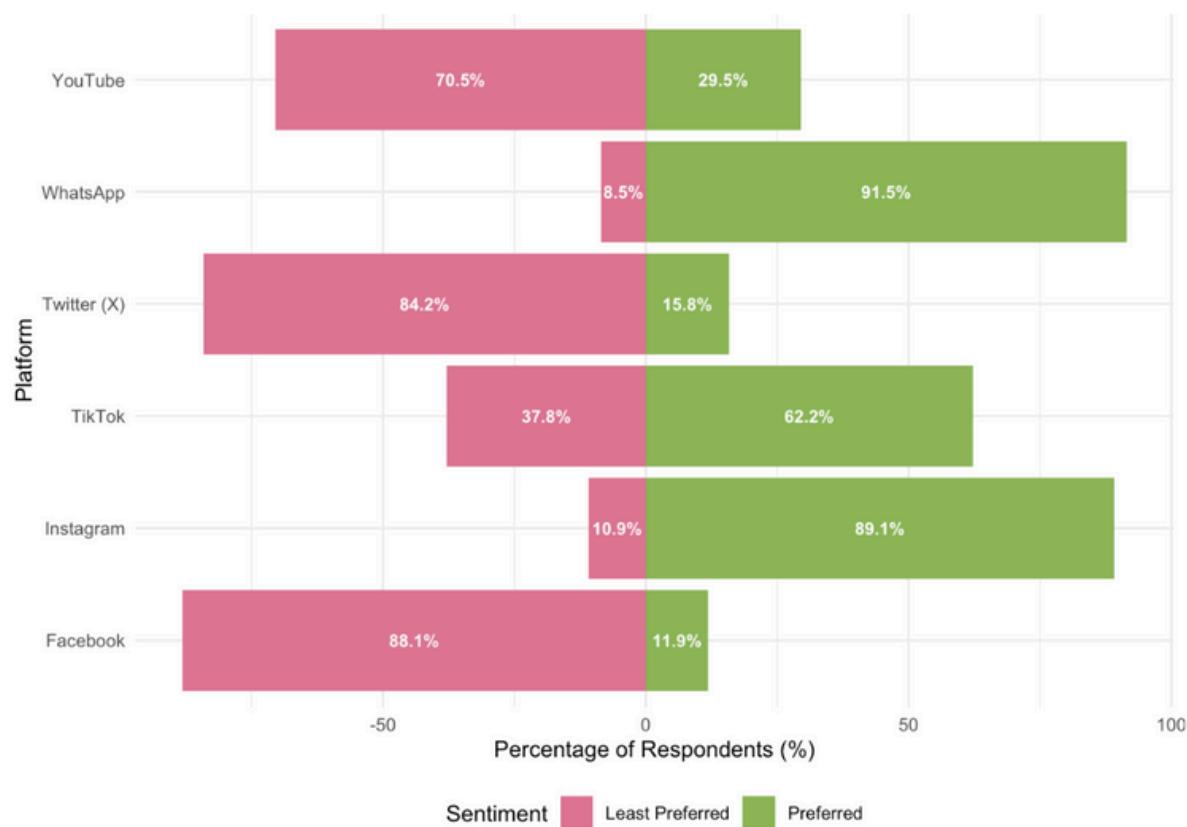


Table 6 - Social Media Platform Preferences

Political News Consumption

Instagram and Website/App News Sources emerge as the most frequently used platforms for political news among respondents. Approximately 64.4% of Instagram users and 66.5% of Website/App News Sources users report consuming news either frequently or very frequently on these platforms. Traditional media—Print, TV, and Radio—also maintain a steady user base, with 62% of respondents accessing political news through these channels frequently or very frequently.

In contrast, TikTok and Twitter (X) show differing usage patterns. While 68.5% of Twitter (X) users rely on it frequently or very frequently for political news, TikTok sees a more divided audience: only 48.9% report frequent or very frequent use, while 14.6% rarely consume news on the platform. YouTube stands out with 66.5% of respondents using it frequently or very frequently for news, though a notable 8.2% report using it rarely.

Importantly, Friends and Community networks play a significant role in political news exposure. Nearly 65.5% of respondents frequently or very frequently engage in news-related discussions within their social circles. This highlights the continued importance of interpersonal communication as a channel for political awareness, complementing both digital and traditional media sources.

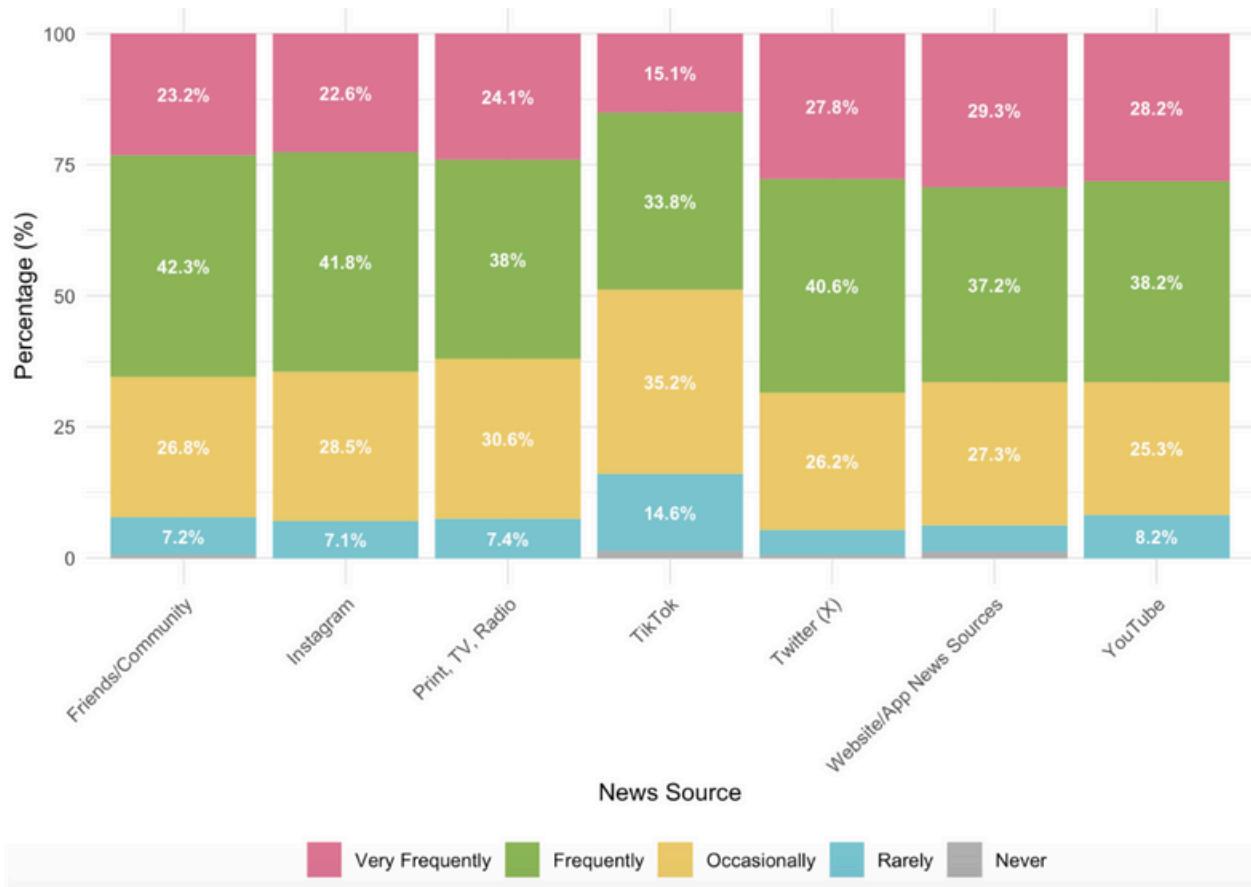


Table 6 - Frequency of Political News Consumption by Source

Discussing Social and Political Issues with Community

Most respondents engage in discussions about social and political issues with their peers, family members, and community, though the frequency of these conversations varies. Only 3.4% report never participating in such discussions, and 15% do so rarely—about once a month or less. The most common pattern is occasional engagement, with 39% discussing these topics several times a month. Meanwhile, 30.3% report engaging in political and social conversations at least once a week, and 12.3% do so almost daily. These findings suggest that while political and social discourse is a regular part of life for many young people, frequent or sustained engagement is concentrated among a smaller, more active segment of the population.

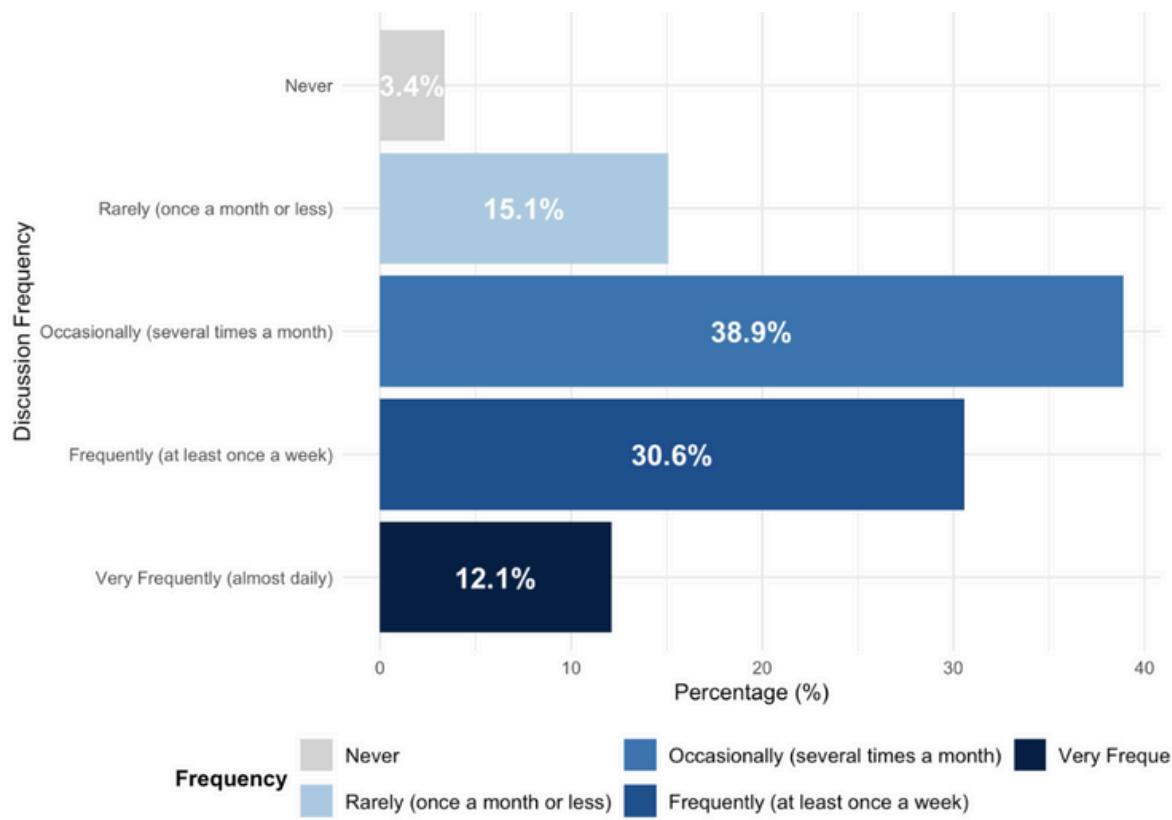


Table 7 - Frequency of Discussing Political Issues with Community

Variation of Youth Perspective on Civic Space



Youth perspectives on civic space in Indonesia vary widely based on their level of engagement, regional context, and perceptions of government responsiveness.

While those actively involved in civil society organizations (SMOs) tend to have a stronger understanding of civic space, many young people remain disengaged or unfamiliar with the concept. Regional differences further shape these perspectives, with Western Indonesia expressing the highest concerns over increasing restrictions, while Eastern Indonesia reflects a more optimistic outlook.

Among youth activists, perceptions also diverge—some view civic space as increasingly constrained and feel the need to be cautious in interacting with the government, while others do not perceive immediate threats to their work. This variation reflects broader historical and political influences, where opposition to the state has long been a defining feature of Indonesian civil society.

As a result, some activists see the government as an adversary undermining democratic freedoms, whereas others believe there is still room for collaboration. This section explores these differing perspectives, examining the connections between civic engagement, regional disparities, and the evolving role of government leadership in shaping youth participation.



Defining Civic Space

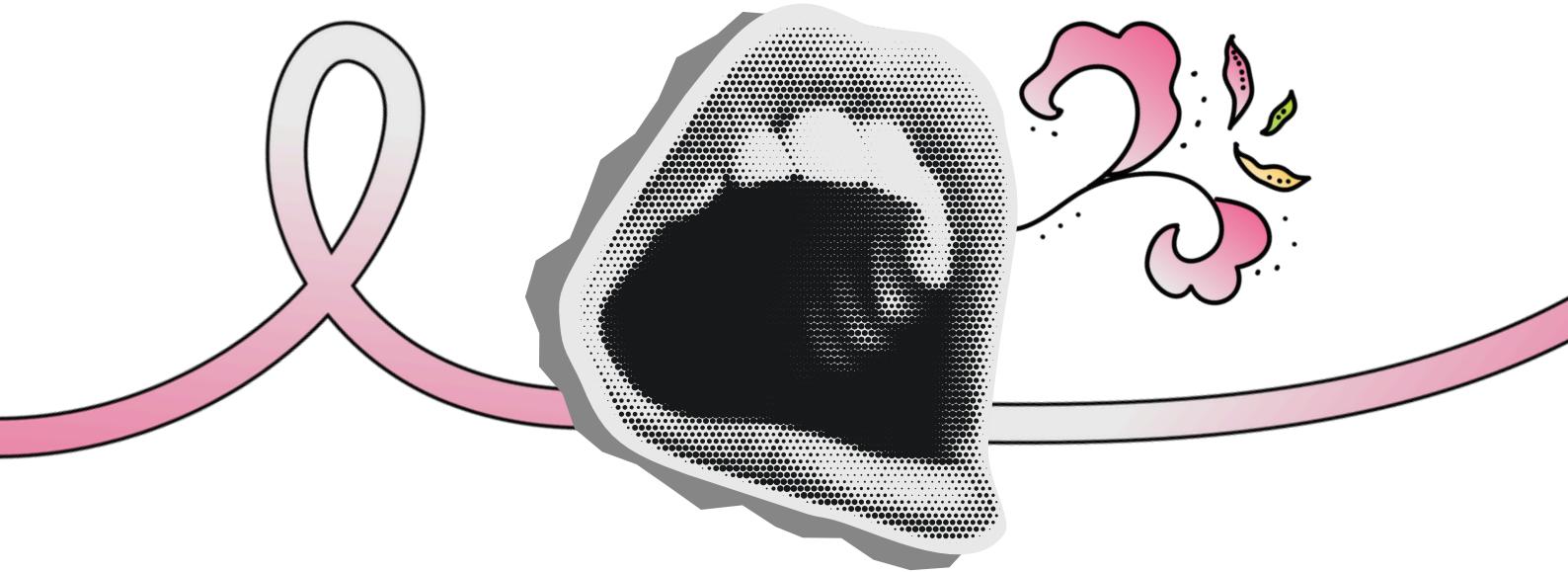
Nearly half of the respondents (47.3%) believe that civic space encompasses all of the provided definitions, reflecting a broad and integrated understanding of the concept.

This comprehensive view includes **five key elements**:

1. Freedom of association, assembly, and expression
2. The state's role in protecting fundamental rights
3. Physical public spaces for social, political, or cultural activities
4. An environment that supports discussion and diverse opinions
5. The freedom to criticize and express views both online and offline.

Each of these components plays a crucial role in shaping the civic experiences of young people. Freedom of expression and assembly allows youth to organize, advocate, and mobilize around issues that affect them. State protection of rights ensures that their participation is not only permitted but also safeguarded from repression or discrimination.

Public spaces—whether parks, campuses, or community centers—provide the physical venues for engagement, protest, and dialogue, while digital spaces expand access to civic participation beyond geographic boundaries. Finally, a culture that values open discussion and diverse opinions helps foster democratic norms among youth, encouraging critical thinking, empathy, and inclusion. Together, these elements create the conditions for young people to be heard, to connect with others, and to participate meaningfully in democratic life.



Among respondents who selected individual definitions, the most commonly recognized aspect was freedom of association, assembly, and expression (23.4%). This was followed closely by space for discussion and diverse opinions (21.0%) and freedom to criticize and express views online or offline (20.8%). Additionally, 20.2% identified the state's protective role as central to civic space, while 14.3% emphasized the importance of physical spaces for gathering.

These findings suggest that while specific rights remain foundational to the concept, many young people increasingly view civic space as a multidimensional environment—where legal protections, open dialogue, physical venues, and digital platforms all play a vital role in enabling participation and expression.

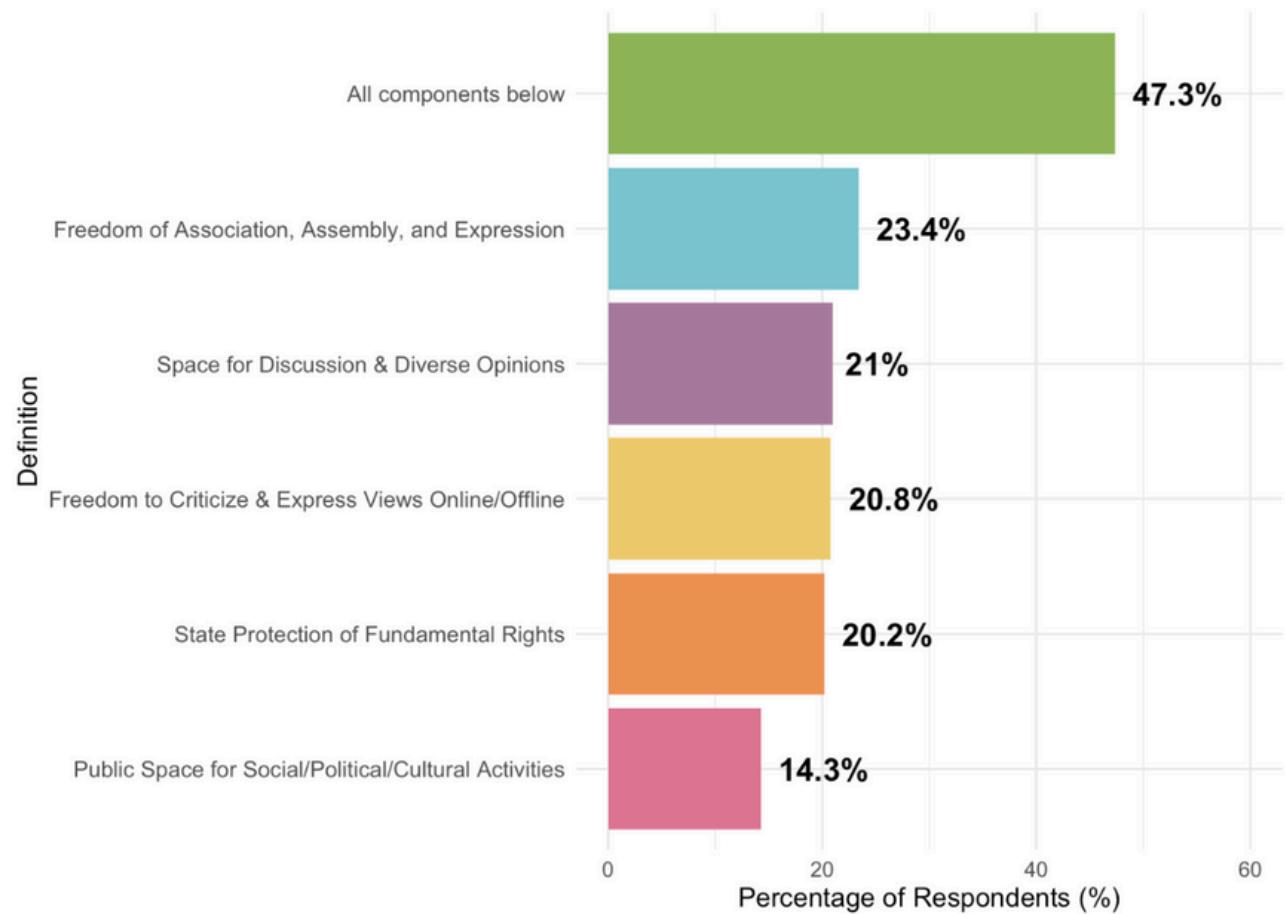


Table 8 - How Respondents Define 'Civic Space'

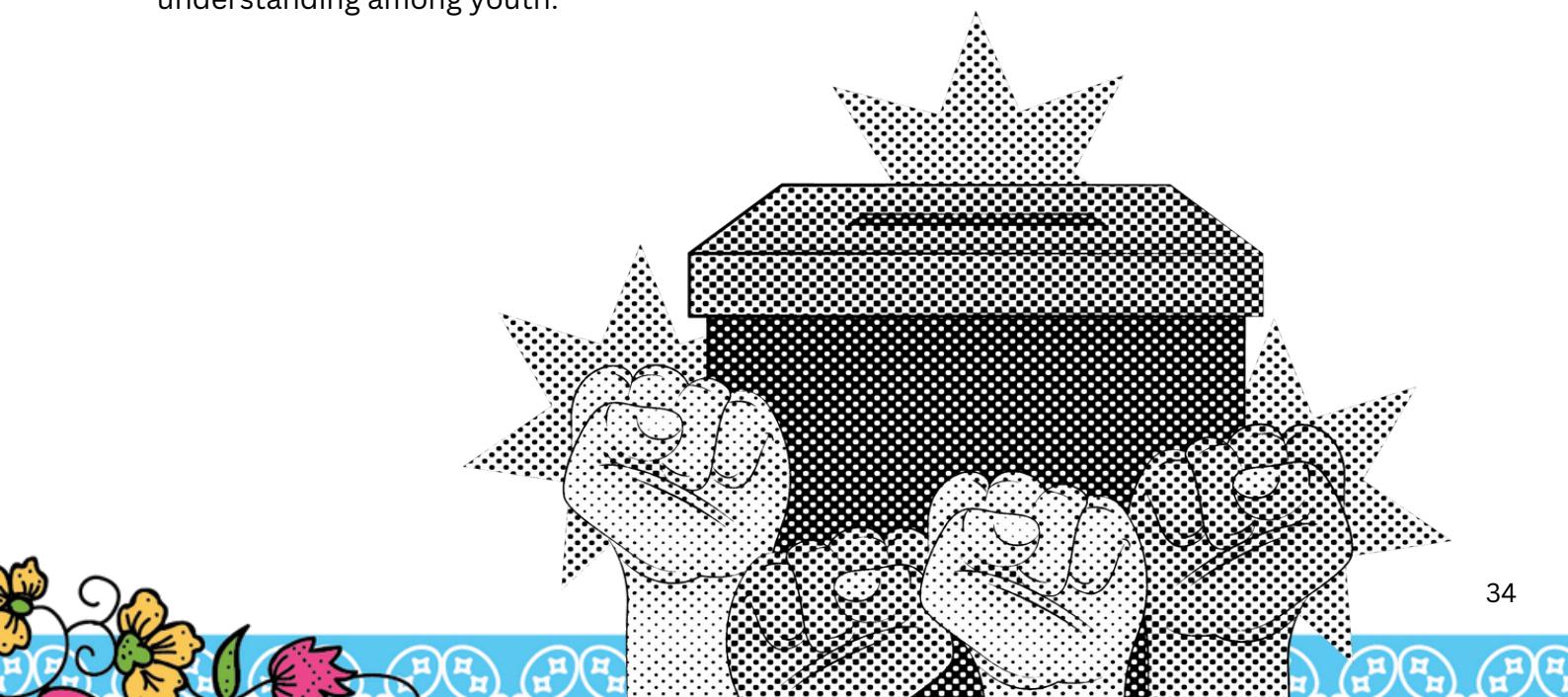


Patterns in the survey data further reveal that respondents who have participated in activism tend to adopt a more expansive and integrated view of civic space. Among those with activist experience, 36.1% selected "All of the Above", compared to 27.8% of non-participants—indicating a stronger recognition of the multifaceted nature of civic space among those who are civically engaged.

This group was also less likely to focus solely on any single aspect of civic space, suggesting that activism may expose individuals to the broader institutional, cultural, and spatial components that collectively shape democratic participation. In contrast, non-participants were more evenly distributed across specific dimensions, with slightly higher percentages selecting freedom to criticize online/offline (16.9%) and freedom of association and assembly (15.9%), possibly reflecting a narrower or more rights-focused understanding rooted in individual liberties rather than structural protections or collective spaces.

This divergence in how civic space is understood may reflect differences in exposure, lived experience, and civic literacy. Activist participants are more likely to encounter the limits and possibilities of civic space firsthand—through protests, organizing, or advocacy—leading to a deeper awareness of how legal protections, public space, institutional responsiveness, and cultural norms intersect. Non-participants, by contrast, may rely more heavily on abstract understandings or media portrayals of civic rights, emphasizing individual expression without necessarily recognizing the importance of collective action, state accountability, or inclusive dialogue.

These distinctions point to the formative role of civic experience in shaping conceptual clarity and underscore the value of active participation in building more nuanced civic understanding among youth.



Understanding Civic Space

The survey data highlights a clear connection between participation in civil society organizations (SMOs) and understanding of civic space.

Among those who have participated in civic or activist activities, 35.3% report a good understanding ("Quite understand") of the term, and 9.1% say they fully understand it.

In contrast, respondents who have never participated demonstrate a weaker grasp—only 19.6% say they quite understand, and just 1.8% report full understanding. Notably, 18.3% of non-participants state they do not understand the term at all, compared to only 7.3% among those with activist experience. While similar shares from both groups (31–34%) have only heard the term briefly, the more advanced levels of understanding are strongly skewed toward those with direct civic engagement. This suggests that hands-on experience contributes significantly to deeper awareness of civic concepts.

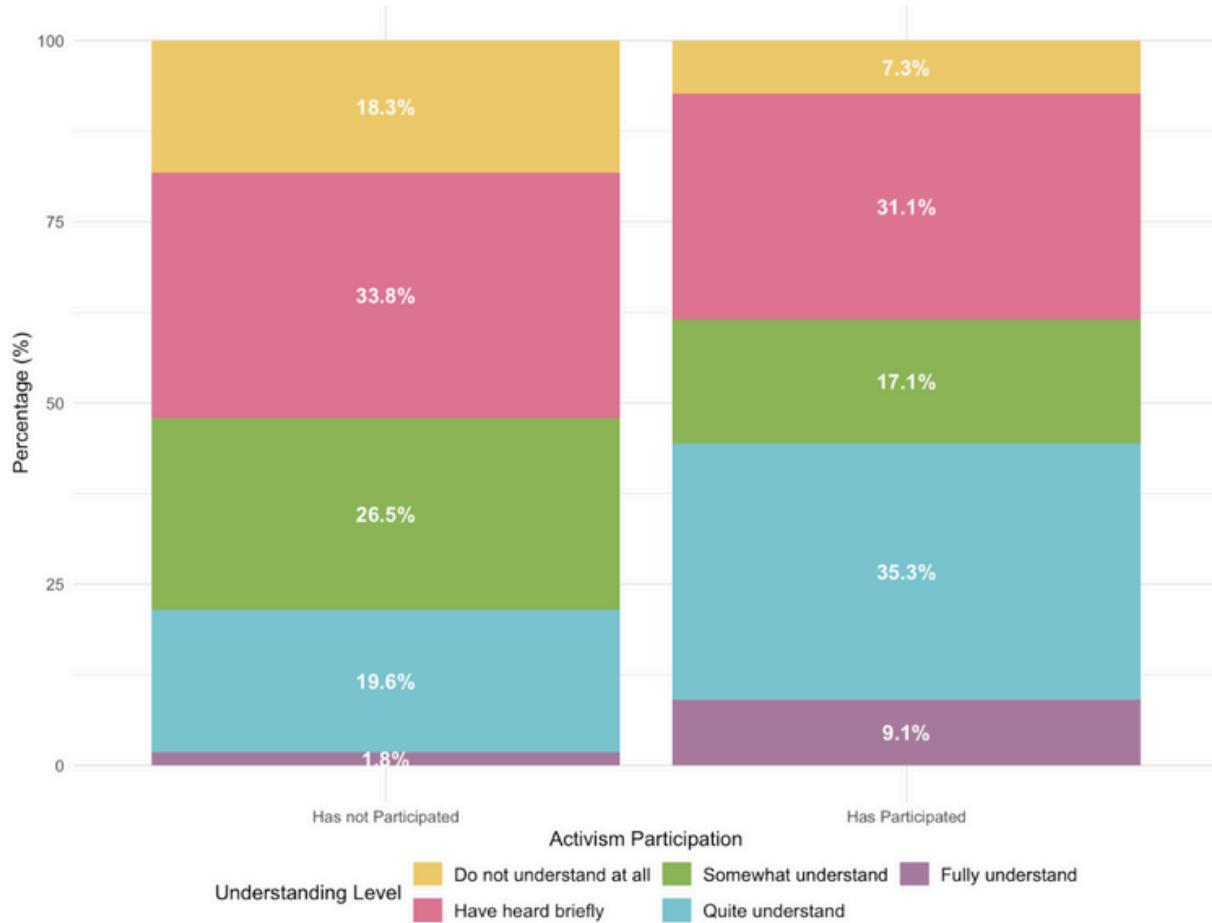


Table 9 - Understanding of 'Civic Space' by SMOs Participation

These patterns are echoed in the relationship between education level and understanding of civic space.

Respondents with lower educational attainment tend to show more limited comprehension.

For example, 100% of those with only primary education had merely heard the term briefly, while 60% of junior high school graduates somewhat understood it. However, only a small portion at this level demonstrated full understanding. Among senior high school respondents, understanding was more varied, with 24.2% reporting they quite understood and 4.8% saying they fully understood the concept—though 15.7% still said they did not understand it at all. This indicates that while civic awareness begins to develop at the secondary level, notable gaps remain.

Comprehension improves noticeably with post-secondary education. Among respondents with vocational diplomas, 18.8% said they quite understood the term, though half had only heard it briefly. Those with a bachelor's degree displayed the strongest understanding overall: 35.8% reported quite understanding and 7.1% fully understood, although 29.6% still had only limited exposure to the concept. Among postgraduates, responses were evenly split across understanding levels, though the small sample size limits broader conclusions. Overall, the data points to a positive correlation between both education and civic participation and deeper understanding of civic space—yet also shows that formal education alone may not be sufficient without practical engagement to reinforce civic awareness.

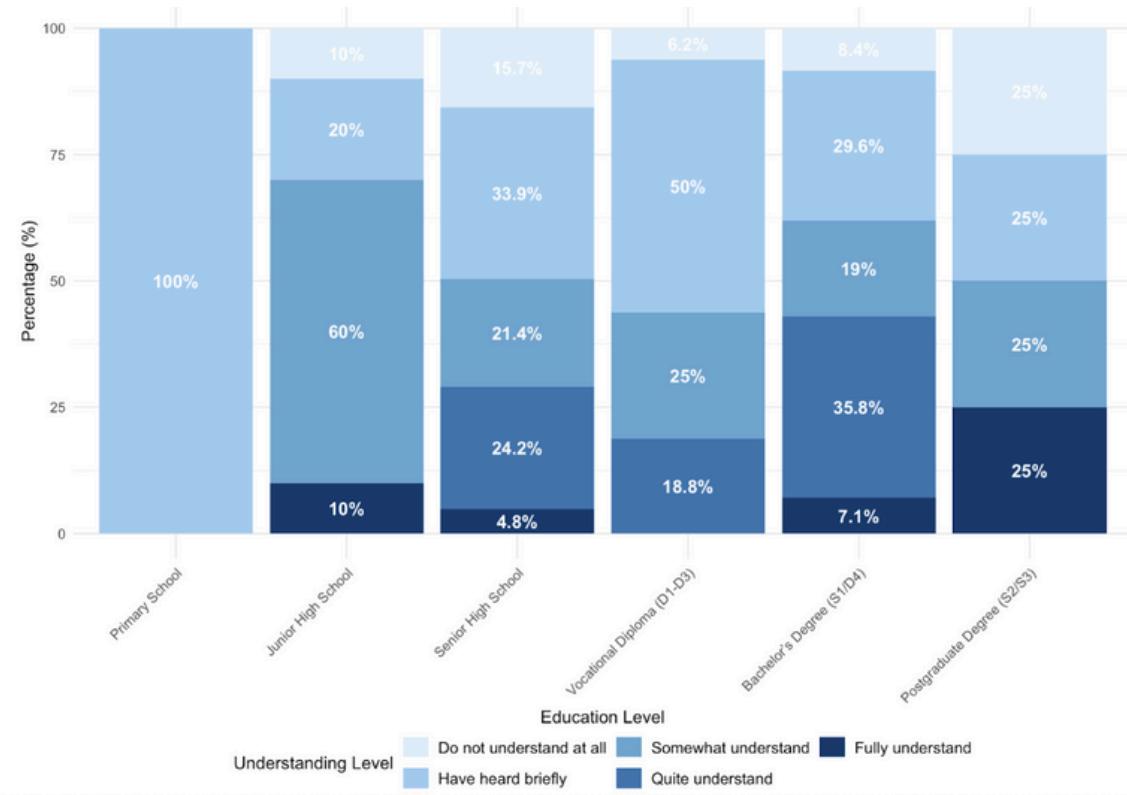


Table 10 - Understanding of 'Civic Space' by Education Level

Perception of Civic Space in the Current Regime by Region

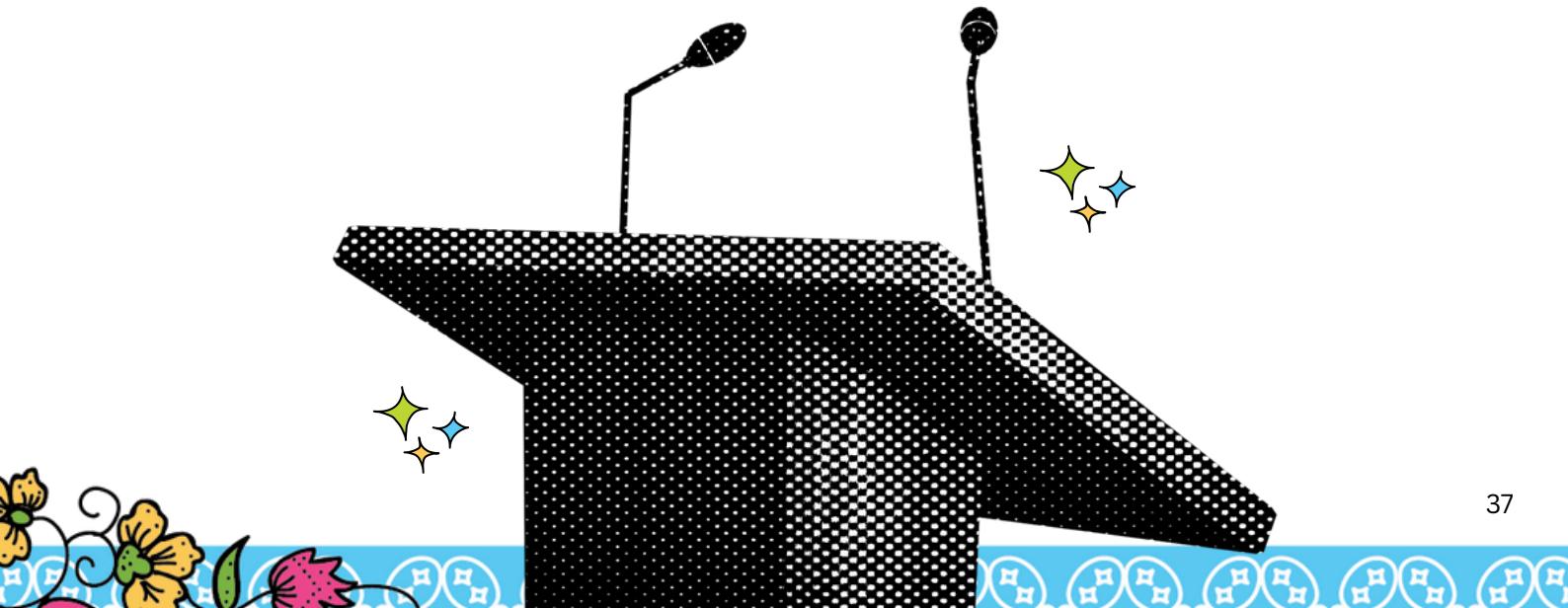
The perception of changes in civic space in Indonesia among survey respondents varies notably across regions, reflecting distinct local experiences and political climates.

In Central Indonesia, the most common response was "More Open" (33.3%), followed closely by "No Change" (31.7%). While these responses suggest a generally stable or improving perception of civic space, a combined 26.9%

of respondents believe civic space has become either "More Restricted" (17.5%) or "Much More Restricted" (9.5%), signaling that concern over narrowing freedoms is still present in a significant minority.

In Eastern Indonesia, respondents expressed a slightly more optimistic view. "No Change" remains the most common response at 36.1%, but a substantial 27.8% reported that civic space has become "More Open", and 9.7% said it is "Much More Open". While 20.1% noted increased restriction, only 6.3% felt conditions were "Much More Restricted"—making Eastern Indonesia the region with the lowest level of concern regarding civic space contraction.

In contrast, Western Indonesia displays the most polarized outlook. Although 27.7% believe there has been "No Change", this region also reports the highest level of perceived restriction, with 31.4% stating civic space has become "More Restricted" and 9.5% saying it is "Much More Restricted". This totals over 40% expressing concern about increased limitations. At the same time, 23.3% feel civic space has become "More Open", and 8.1% believe it is "Much More Open", suggesting a significant divergence of experiences or perceptions within the region.



Overall, "No Change" is the most frequently reported sentiment in each region, but the nuances reveal important regional contrasts. Western Indonesia stands out for its high perception of increased restrictions, hinting at heightened political tension or crackdowns on civic freedoms. Meanwhile, Eastern Indonesia presents a relatively more hopeful outlook, with the strongest perception of openness and the least concern about civic space narrowing. These regional differences underscore the uneven nature of democratic backsliding and civic engagement conditions across Indonesia.

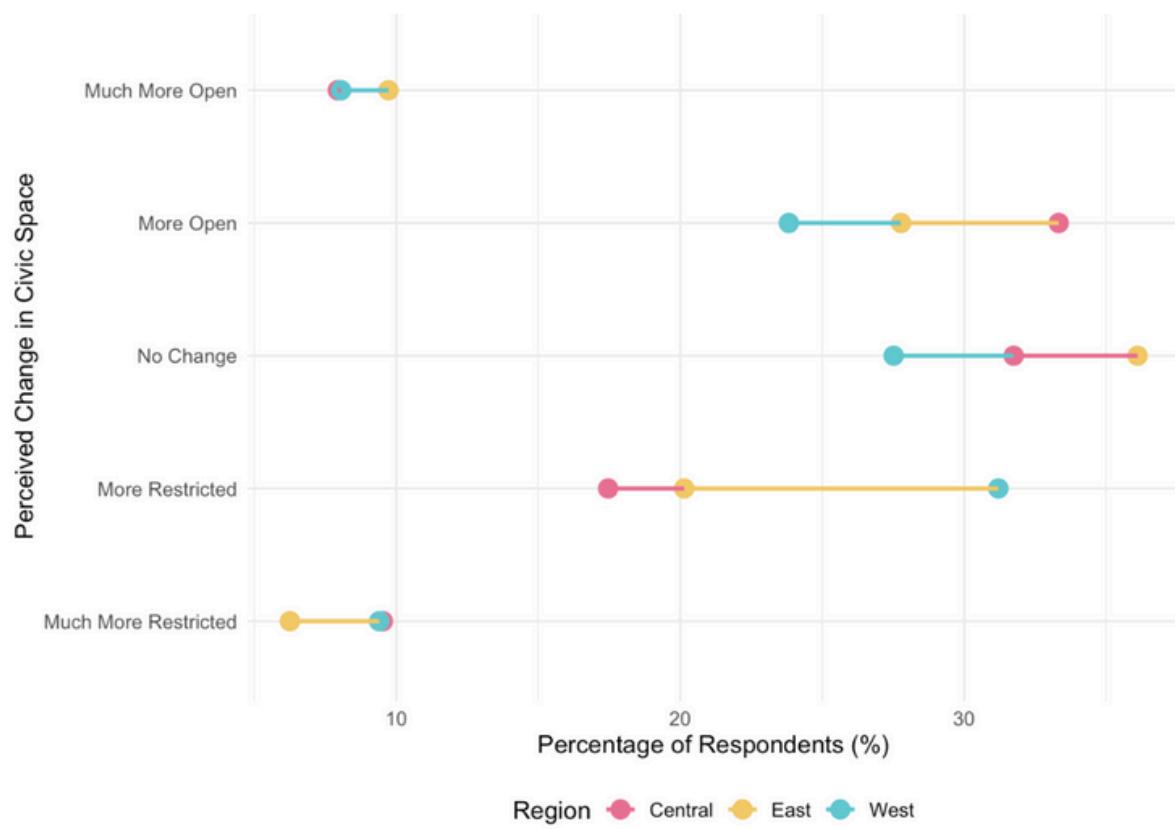
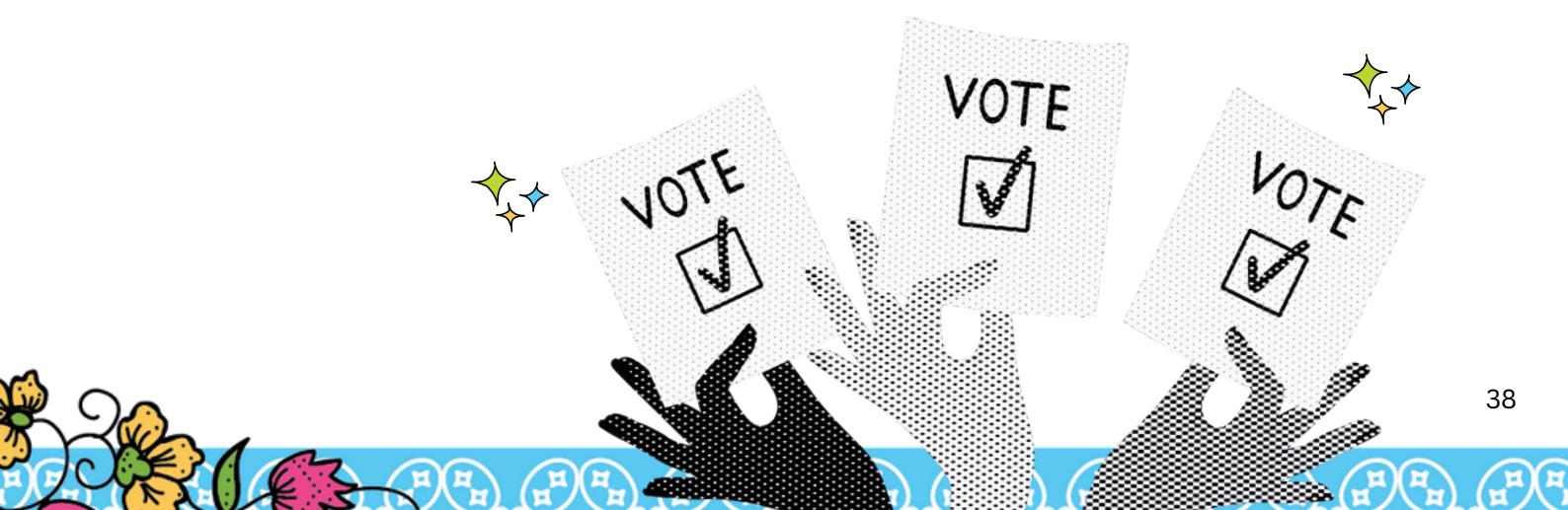


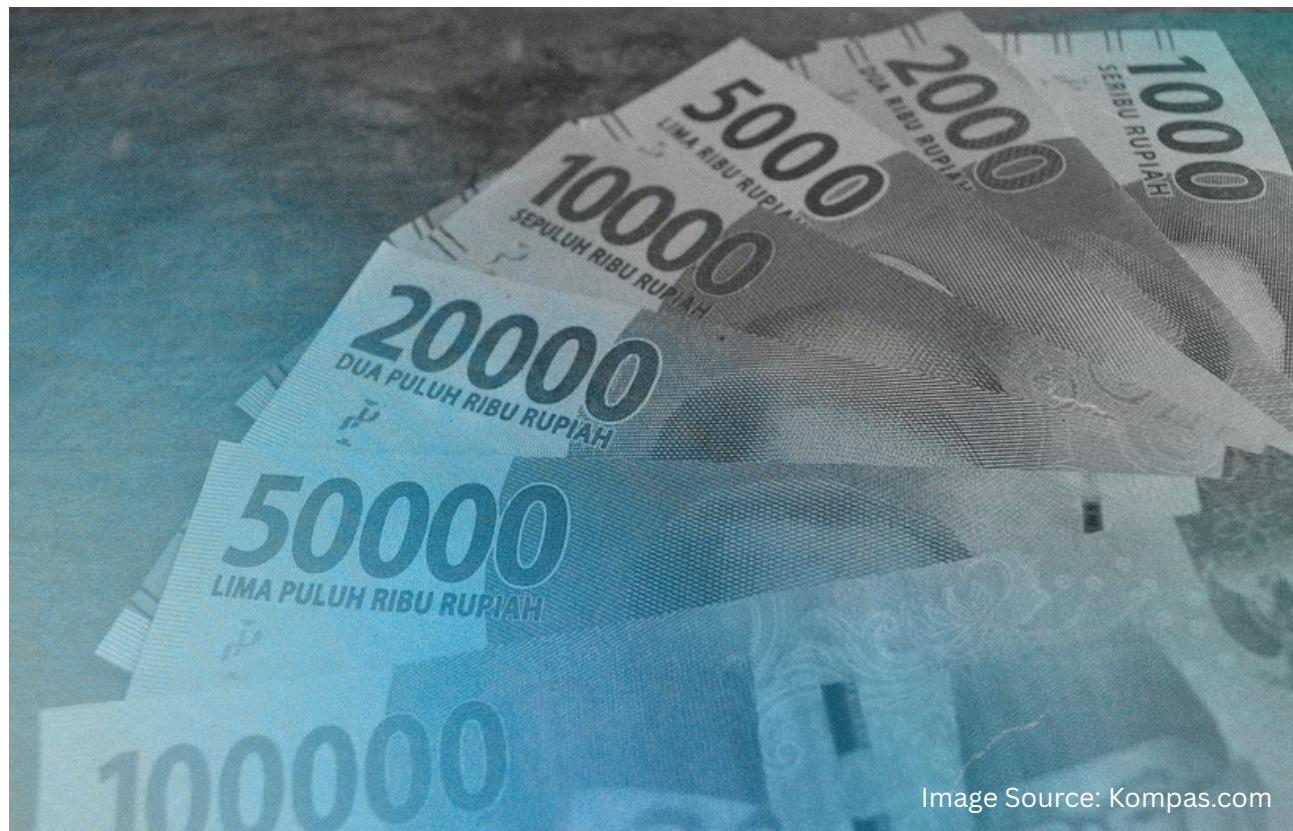
Table 11 - Perceived Change in 'Civic Space' by Region



Perception of Civic Space in the Current Regime by Monthly Expenses

The survey data shows a nuanced relationship between respondent's monthly expense levels and perceptions of changes in civic space. Among respondents in the lowest expense bracket (less than Rp 1,000,000 per month), the majority perceived either "no change" (35.0%) or that civic space had become "more open" (25.6%). A notable portion (22.7%) believed the space had become "more restricted", while only a small share (7.9%) viewed it as "much more restricted". These responses suggest that lower-income individuals are somewhat optimistic or perceive relative stability, possibly due to limited exposure to civic or political constraints.

As expenses rise to the middle brackets (Rp 1M – Rp 3M), the perception shifts slightly. In the Rp 1M – 2M group, the share of respondents seeing civic space as "more restricted" increases to 29.2%, while those seeing "more openness" remain steady at 24.7%. The Rp 2M – 3M group reflects a more evenly distributed perception across all categories, with nearly 29% perceiving "more openness", 27.5% "no change", and 26.1% "more restriction". This balance may reflect broader access to civic discourse, allowing for more varied assessments of democratic conditions.



Interestingly, in the higher expense brackets (above Rp 3M), perceptions tend to polarize. Respondents spending Rp 3M – 5M reported the highest percentage believing that civic space has become "more open" (35.7%), but also had a relatively high share (21.4%) believing it is "much more restricted". Among those spending more than Rp 5M per month, 44.4%—the highest of any group—perceived civic space as "more restricted". These findings suggest that individuals with greater economic means may be more attuned to political and civic developments and, as such, more critical of the government's direction in maintaining civic freedoms.

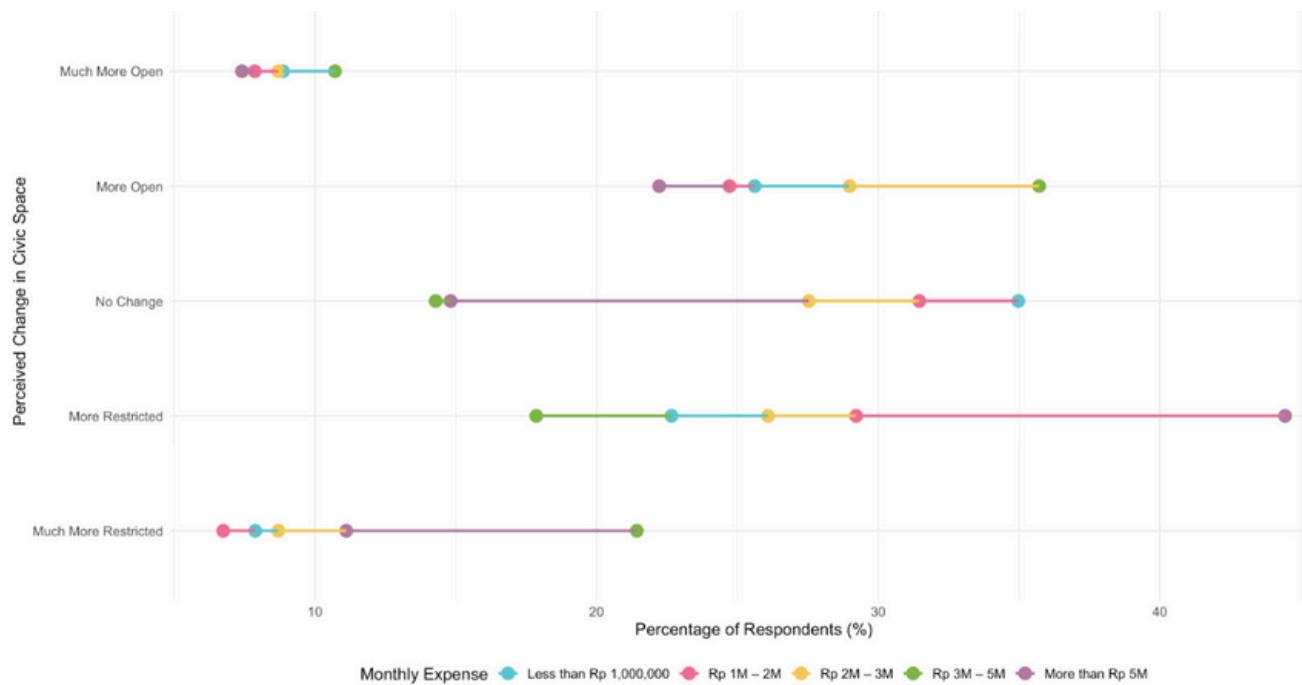


Table 12 - Perceived Change in 'Civic Space' by Monthly Household Expense

Perceived Leadership Characteristics Affecting Civic Space

The survey results indicate that a majority of respondents perceive the current administration's leadership style as restrictive, particularly in relation to civic freedoms and transparency. Over half of the participants identified a lack of transparency and accountability in decision-making (54.5%) and restrictions on freedom of speech or criticism of the government (54.3%) as defining features of the current government. These concerns point to a prevailing sentiment that civic space is narrowing and that the government is increasingly unresponsive to public scrutiny.

Additionally, many respondents highlighted the use of coercive tactics. Nearly 46% reported the use of security forces to intimidate or disperse peaceful protests, while 43% pointed to the use of legal mechanisms to suppress activists or opposition groups. Furthermore, 40.4% believe that decision-making power is overly centralized, concentrated in the hands of a few political elites—an indication of perceived democratic erosion.

Concerns extend to media and civil society as well. Over a third (34.3%) of respondents cited restrictions on press freedom and access to independent information, and 19% mentioned limitations on the freedom to associate and form organizations. Notably, only 12.1% of respondents believe that none of these authoritarian characteristics apply to the current administration, suggesting that public skepticism is widespread.



These findings reveal a strong perception among Indonesian youth of shrinking civic space, diminished freedom of expression, and limited government openness. These attitudes reflect not only concerns about governance but also a broader anxiety about the health of democracy and the protection of fundamental civil liberties in the country.

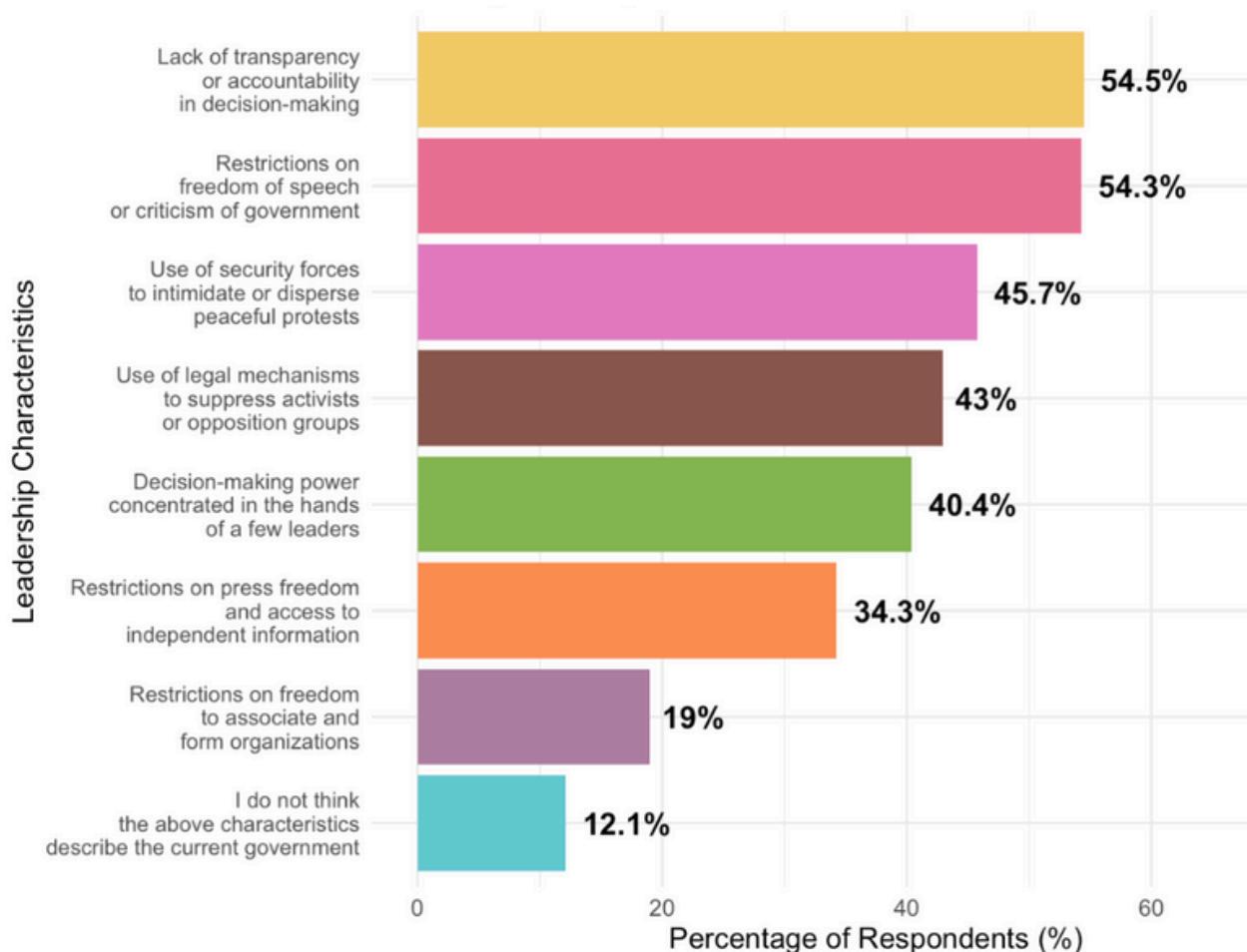


Table 13 - Perceived Leadership Characteristic Affecting 'Civic Space'



Awareness of Shrinking Civic Space

Civic space is essential for activism. It allows activists to discuss pressing issues without the fear of being prosecuted and harassed. Civic space also permits activists to experiment with new strategies, allowing them to test their strategies' propensity of success. Our interviews found that there is a variety of understandings of what is considered a civic space among Indonesian youth activists. Some activists believe that they need to be more cautious in interacting with the government.

These activists continue the popular approach among Indonesian civil society organizations that seek to position themselves as a critic of the government.

Such a position has been popular since the emergence of the opposition groups against the authoritarian regime (Eldridge 1995).

In contrast, some of our interviews also document activists who do not feel that their civic space is threatened. Activists in this group see that there are no concerning risks to their works so they feel that shrinking civic space is something distant to them. This section seeks to elaborate those opposing stories.



Opposition against the state has been a culture among Indonesian civil society organizations. Such a culture is nurtured under the opposition movement against Suharto's New Order. Adopting this stance, activists see state and politicians as the enemy. The long history and memory of state repression seem to deter these activists to see the state as their ally in advancing progressive social changes (Hadiwinata 2005, 115). Thus, in their eyes, the activists comprehend that under the situation of shrinking civic space, the state has failed to guarantee a safe space for social activism. Some of them even perceive that the state plays a role in undermining the civic space for pushing civil society agenda. Vana, an relentless women rights activist, argues

“I feel that our organizations is often obstructed in expressing our values in public. In campus, many people are not open to women rights issues, especially when we advocate them with issues such as anti-capitalism, anti-militarism and anti-patriarchy. These issues were perceived as too sensitive. In addition, in social media, we are facing threats because our organization focuses on young women and youth. The digital threats often come when we voice loudly women rights issues” (Vana, personal interview, December 16, 2025).

Threats felt by activists in civic space also influence the way they interact with the government. Threats shape activism strategies ([Davenport 2005](#)). Threats signal to activists that their organization is under the possibility of being damaged and eliminated. Such a signal activates the activists' calculation of costs, including the potential future impact of the threats. Calculating the costs, activists estimate the extent to which the threats can turn into physical repression and damage their organization. Through this deliberation, some activists would take a cautious approach to advance their agenda because they are afraid of the consequence of undergoing repression. Undergoing Indonesia's shrinking civic space, due to the threats posed to their allies across civil society sectors, the activists fear the consequences of criticizing the government. Such a feeling drives the activists to adopt a cautious stance, especially if they still conceive the government as a partner in their activism. Mada, a persistent young advocate of environmental justice, opines



“We are now helping the government. Practically, we cannot criticize them...The government has a list of civil society organizations which, according to them, are sensitive and too dangerous because they often condemn the government. That poses a challenge in building a synergy between civil society and the government if the governments already have an assumption [about civil society organizations]...We are trying to take the middle ground. Thus, we can still criticize them because our memorandum of understanding is not between us and the national government but with the subnational government. We can still criticize them but that has already put us on the list”

(Mada, personal interview, December 15, 2024).

In contrast to the opposing stance against the government, other activists believe that the government only poses minimal threats to their activism. These activists perceive that their line of work is not vulnerable to the government repression. Issues they advocate are not considered sensitive to the government so the activists perceive that they can still do business as usual. The activists see that their freedom of expression has not been obstructed by the government. That creates a space for them to innovate and execute various activities related to their organization’s agenda. They still need to be aware of potential dangers of voicing their agenda but such a stance does not make them to hold back their activism. Belinda, a youth activist, contends

“Generally, we have not met any obstructions in voicing our agenda. We advocate so many issues. For now, we are pushing environmental issues, child marriage, and civil freedom. Those are three main programs that we are running now. When we voice issues related to those three programs to public or when we are doing research, we are relieved that we have not met any repression or restrictions in socializing our program objective. We are more careful in disseminating information so we would not have to be prosecuted by the Information and Electronic Transaction Bill...so far, our activism have not met any obstructions in expressing our organizational values”

(Belinda, personal interview, December 12, 2024)



Drivers and Challenges of Shrinking Civic Space

The erosion of civic space in Indonesia is shaped by both structural and institutional factors that limit youth engagement and activism. Politicians seeking to consolidate power have undermined democratic institutions, weakened electoral integrity, and introduced restrictive laws that curtail freedom of expression and association. Poor government performance has further fueled public dissatisfaction, while crisis moments have been exploited to pass controversial policies that restrict civic freedoms. As a result, young people face significant barriers to participation, including fear of harassment, lack of government protection, and limited access to resources for youth-led initiatives.

Despite these challenges, young Indonesians continue to emphasize key factors necessary for fostering a safe and youth-friendly civic space.

Freedom to express opinions openly, the right to assemble peacefully, and state protection from discrimination and threats are among the most crucial elements for ensuring meaningful civic engagement. However, many youth still struggle with systemic obstacles such as digital repression, restricted access to independent information, and a shrinking public sphere for political activism.

This section explores the political and legal drivers of shrinking civic space, the challenges young people face in engaging with civic life, and the conditions necessary to create an environment where youth activism can thrive. Understanding these dynamics is essential for identifying pathways to strengthen youth participation and safeguard democratic freedoms in Indonesia.

Drivers of Shrinking Civic Space

Conversing with the activists, they acknowledge different causes of the shrinking civic space in Indonesia. The activists point out that shrinking civic space stems from the behaviors of politicians which sabotage and undermine democratic institutions (e.g., elections, mass media).

Politicians undermine democratic institutions due to the drive to accumulate power beyond what has been given to them. When this drive meets constraints imposed by democratic institutions (e.g., term limit), they devise strategies to weaken those constraints.

For instance, when Joko Widodo was close to finishing his second presidential term, he sought to maintain his power by extending his tenure to the third one. Although he failed to extend his term, his attempt epitomizes how politicians always test the capacity of democratic institutions to limit their power.

Our conversations with the activists convey such an argument. The activists mention that politicians' behaviors undermine shrinking civic space through their weak performance, issuing authoritarian regulations and exploiting critical moments to smuggle controversial laws.



Weak government performance has been touted as the source of the democratic breakdown (Linz and Stepan 1978), a process equivalent to shrinking civic space. Government performance undermines democracy when a democracy cannot deliver its promise. During elections, politicians promise their voters that they will formulate and implement policies to improve the voters' welfare. Following their win in the elections, however, politicians can compromise their promises due to their need to establish a stable government.

They opt to prioritize the interest of their winning coalition instead of the voters' preferences (De Mesquita et. al., 2003). When this scenario unfolds, politicians tend to underdeliver. When a regime cannot deliver its promises, public dissatisfaction piles up. It can turn into dissents that, in turn, undermine the regime's legitimacy and pave the way for anti-democratic politicians to thrive as the agent of shrinking civic space. Following this logic, some of the activists contend that the government's weak performance in administering elections has contributed to weakening civil space. Ahsan, a young activist in a health issue-advocating organization, argues

“I see that democratization in Indonesia is declining because of [weak government] performance. It is not that I am a part of the opposition, but I see that reality at the subnational level. I see that the decline is caused by, one of them, the rigged election, violated by political actors in different election phases”

(Ahsan, personal interview, December 13, 2024).

While government performance ushers politicians that undermine shrinking civic space, other activists believe that after grabbing power, politicians tend to utilize it for installing repressive laws and regulations that are supposed to uphold democracy. Instead of preserving and strengthening civil and political rights, the politicians choose to pass laws that limit the freedom of expression and political space to advance progressive agenda, especially promoted by civil society.



These laws heavily impact how civil society organizations work.

For instance, although the Indonesian government has reviewed the controversial Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law, civil society activists fear that it still potentially limits civil society work since it still contains controversial clauses such as the clause on defamation. Utilizing this law, politicians who feel insulted by critics can sue them. Echoing this concern, Elfreda, an advocate of youth issues, argues

“I feel that Indonesia’s democracy is facing a significant challenge of shrinking civic space. It becomes clearer everyday that the government issues restrictive policies on freedom of expression, unionizing, and gathering. I see that the ITE Law and the revision of the Criminal Code Bill, and the increasing control of media and civil society organizations from the government [have contributed to the decline]. I also believe that the domination of oligarchy’s interests shapes our current trajectory”

(Elfreda, personal interview, December 21, 2024).

Other activists perceive some political moments as junctures from which Indonesia civic space shrinks. They perceive these critical moments signal an alarm to civil society that democracy is in danger. These are moments when public overlook political issues. Politicians exploit them to pass laws that, in turn, restrict freedom of expression. Politicians estimate that under low supervision from the public, they can avoid public scrutiny and pass controversial laws.

For instance, in September 2019, the House members passed controversial bills that triggered student protests across Indonesia (Priereza and Rahma 2019). This moment exemplifies how politicians capitalize on crises to exert their agenda. Gavin, a young activist of equal health rights, affirms and compares this pattern to his experience



“In relation to the trend of Indonesian democracy, we can see the trend from our work. For instance, during the pandemic, we saw how the government involved the military in administering vaccines and security. That was against the common approach that relies more on science and public health principles...Another issue is the revision of the Criminal Code. We think that is related also to health issues.

For instance, there was a criminalizing article on the promotion of contraception...Or, in the anti-sexual violence bill, that is also related to health issues. So, we have seen how Indonesian democracy is worsening, seen from moments such as the revision of the Corruption Commission Eradication Bill, the revision of the Criminal Code bill, and the anti-sexual violence bill”

(Gavin, personal interview, January 8, 2025)



Key Factors for a Safe and Youth-Friendly Civic Space

A majority of respondents highlighted the freedom to express opinions openly as the most crucial factor in ensuring a safe and youth-friendly civic space, with 75.6% selecting this option. State protection from threats or discrimination (60.4%) and the freedom to gather peacefully (59%) were also seen as essential in fostering a secure environment for youth participation. The ability to associate or form groups was emphasized by 51.3% of respondents, underlining the importance of collective action and organizational autonomy.

Access to information and resources was identified by 51.1%, while 42.8% highlighted the need for representation of diverse perspectives. These findings suggest that while legal protections and institutional safeguards are valued, youth also prioritize open expression, safety, and inclusivity as foundational elements of a civic space that supports their active engagement.

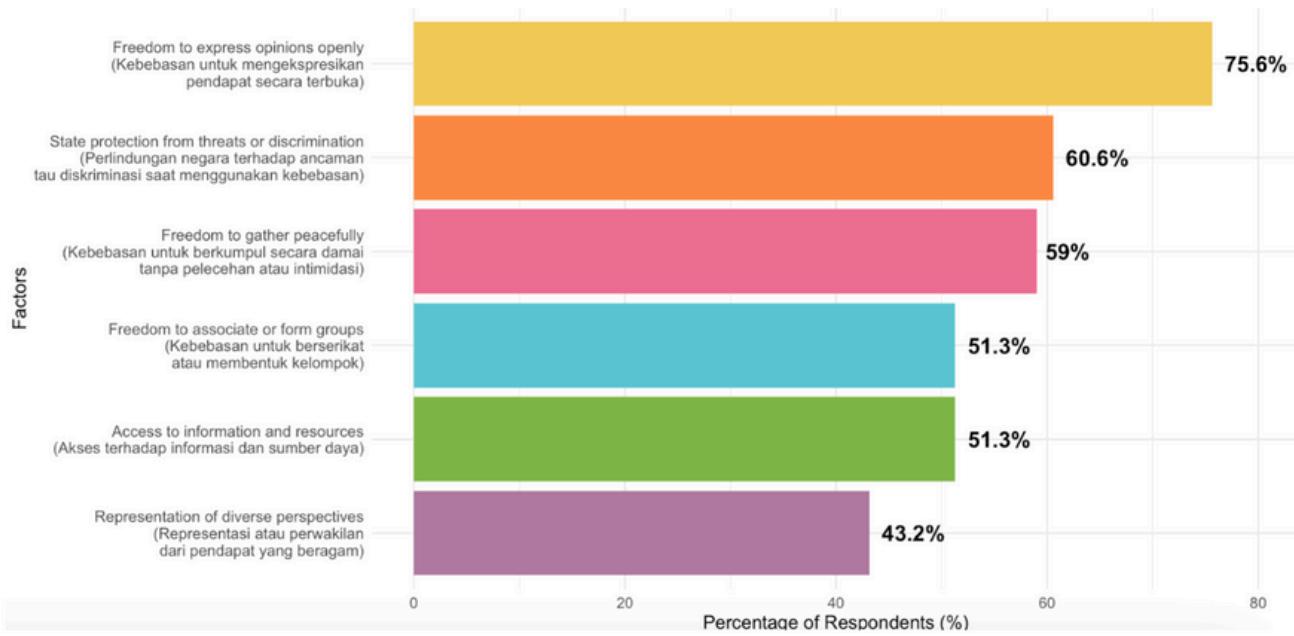


Table 14 - Factors That Make 'Civic Space' Safe and Youth-Friendly

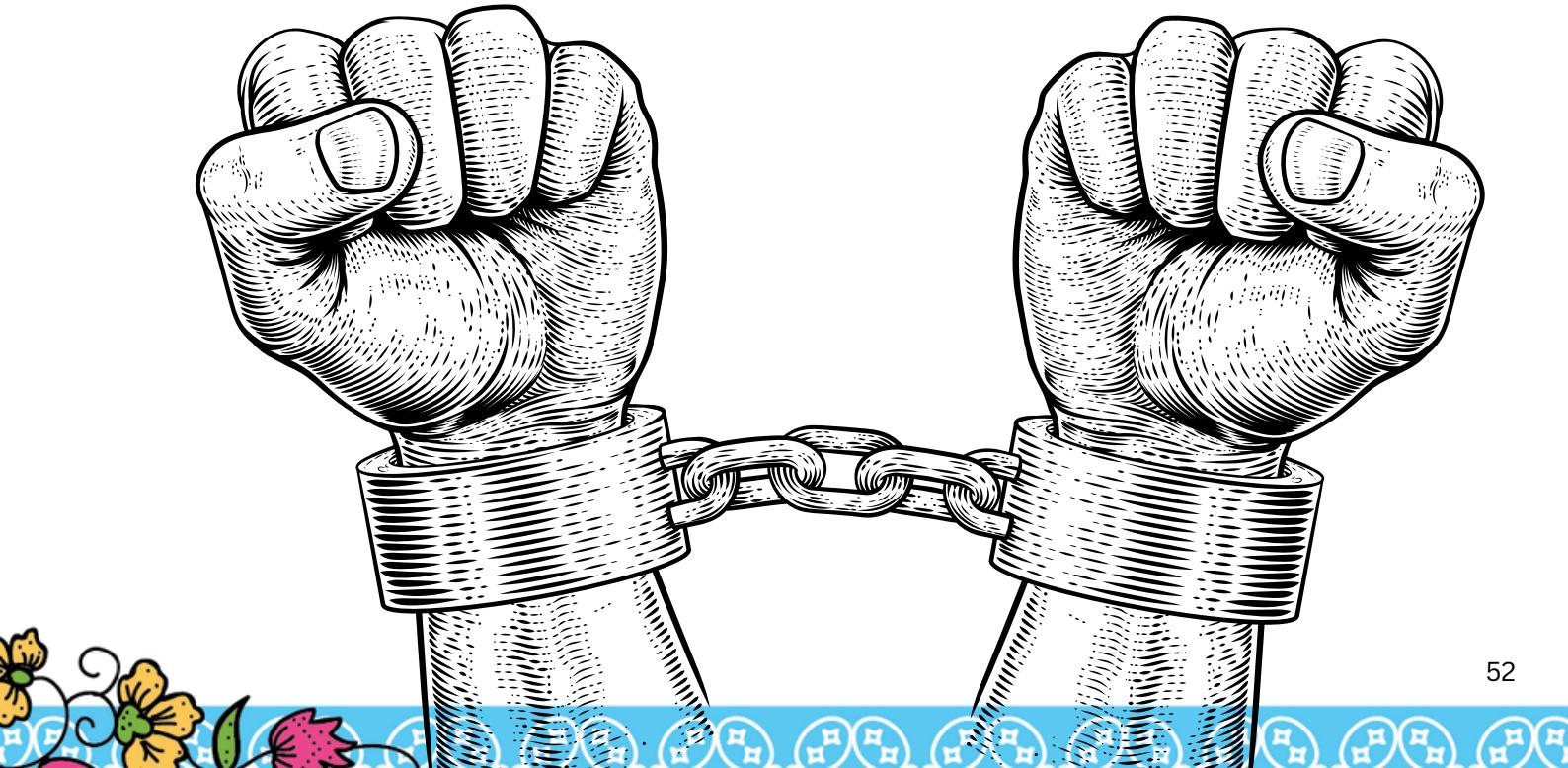
Challenges for Youth in Accessing Civic Space

A significant concern among young people when accessing civic space is the fear of harassment or intimidation when gathering peacefully, with 36.4% of respondents identifying this as a barrier. However, the most pressing issue is the widespread feeling of insecurity around expressing opinions and criticism, particularly in digital spaces like social media—a concern shared by nearly 74% of respondents.

This highlights the growing anxiety surrounding online speech, where surveillance, trolling, or backlash may deter open participation.

In addition, 42% of respondents noted a lack of government protection when exercising their rights, reflecting skepticism about institutional support for youth civic engagement. Limited access to resources and support for youth-led activities was another commonly cited challenge (32.5%), pointing to structural constraints that limit sustained participation.

Concerns about discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or religion were expressed by 24.6%, while 19.4% mentioned restrictions on forming or joining certain groups, indicating that inclusion and freedom of association remain contested in some contexts.



Interestingly, only 15.8% of respondents viewed the absence of safe physical spaces as a primary challenge. This suggests that while physical venues remain important, young people are more acutely impacted by systemic and structural barriers—including legal threats, online insecurity, and lack of institutional support—which shape their ability to participate freely and safely in civic life.

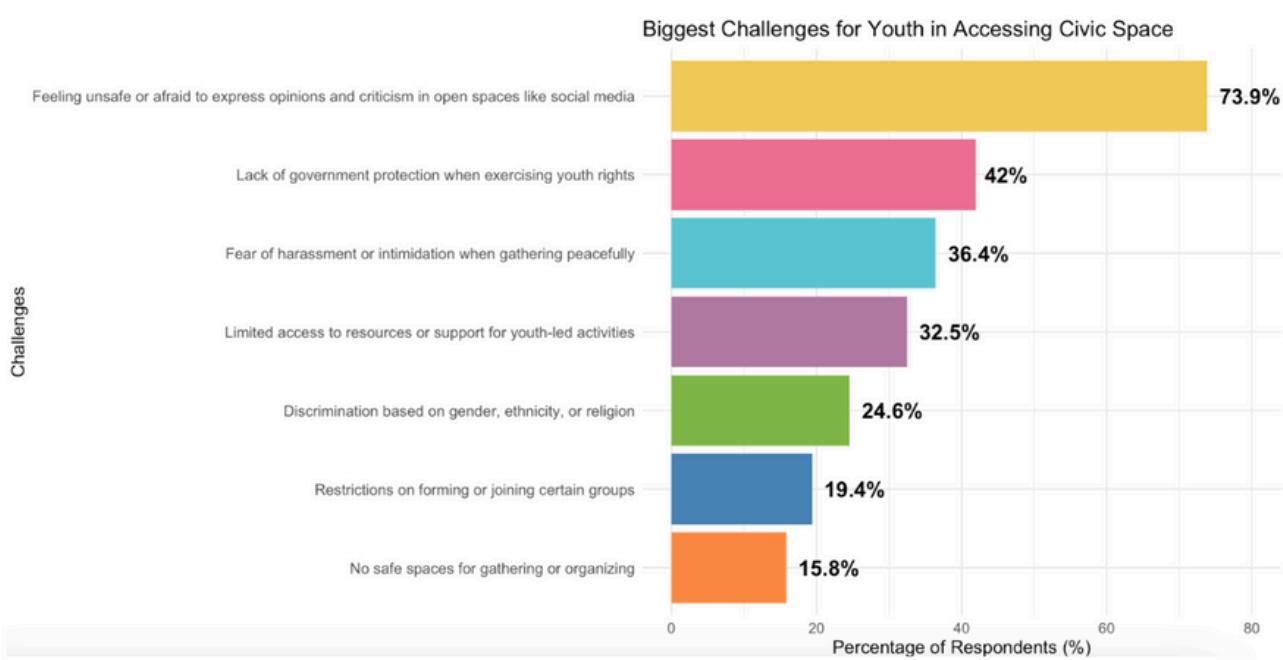


Table 15 - Biggest Challenges for Youth in Accessing 'Civic Space'

Youth Perceptions of Government Responsiveness

The extent to which young Indonesians perceive the government as responsive to their needs and concerns varies significantly across policy areas, regions, and individual experiences. While some respondents acknowledge government efforts in areas such as healthcare and food security, widespread dissatisfaction exists regarding economic opportunities, social inequality, and environmental protection.

Regional differences further shape these perceptions, with youth in Western Indonesia expressing the highest levels of discontent, while those in the East and Central regions exhibit more mixed responses. Beyond survey data, interviews with youth activists provide deeper insight into how government responsiveness is interpreted in different sectors.

While some activists view the government as dismissive and unengaged, others believe there are still opportunities for influence through lobbying and strategic engagement. This section examines these diverse perspectives, highlighting the challenges, variations, and lingering hopes young Indonesians hold regarding the government's role in addressing civic and political concerns.

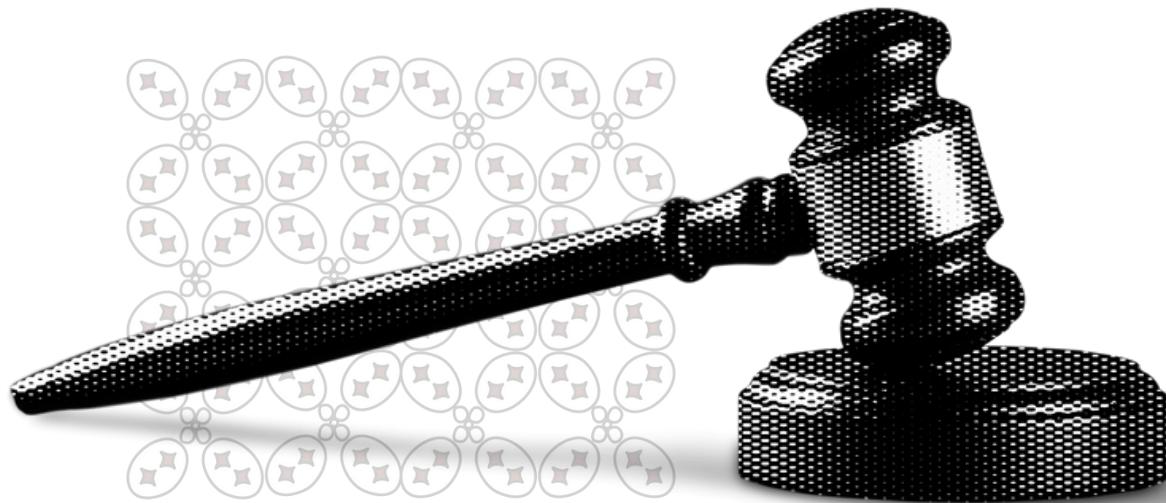
Perception of Responsiveness to Youth-Related Issues

The survey data reveals that youth perceptions of government responsiveness vary considerably across policy areas, with economic and social inequality emerging as major sources of dissatisfaction. The highest levels of perceived low responsiveness are reported in reducing social and economic inequality (61.4%), economic opportunities (58.6%), and poverty alleviation (58.0%). These findings suggest that many young people feel the government is falling short in addressing structural and systemic issues that impact their livelihoods and opportunities for upward mobility.

Environmental and human rights concerns also feature prominently.

Over half of respondents rated government responsiveness as low on environmental protection (54.9%), human rights (54.6%), and protection of vulnerable groups (53.5%). These results point to ongoing anxieties about the government's commitment to inclusivity, accountability, and sustainability. While food security (30.5%) and environmental protection (24.4%) had a relatively higher share of neutral responses, this may reflect uncertainty or mixed perceptions rather than clear satisfaction.

By contrast, healthcare access received the most favorable ratings, with 33.7% of respondents viewing government responsiveness in this area as high. Education access and quality (28.9%) and food security (28.1%) also received comparatively more positive assessments, indicating that some basic services are seen as relatively more reliable or improving.



Overall, these findings underscore a broad sense of dissatisfaction among Indonesian youth regarding the government's performance on equity and opportunity-related issues, while some degree of confidence remains in the state's ability to provide essential services like healthcare, education, and food access. This imbalance suggests a disconnect between policy priorities and the lived realities of young people, who are calling for more inclusive, just, and future-oriented governance.

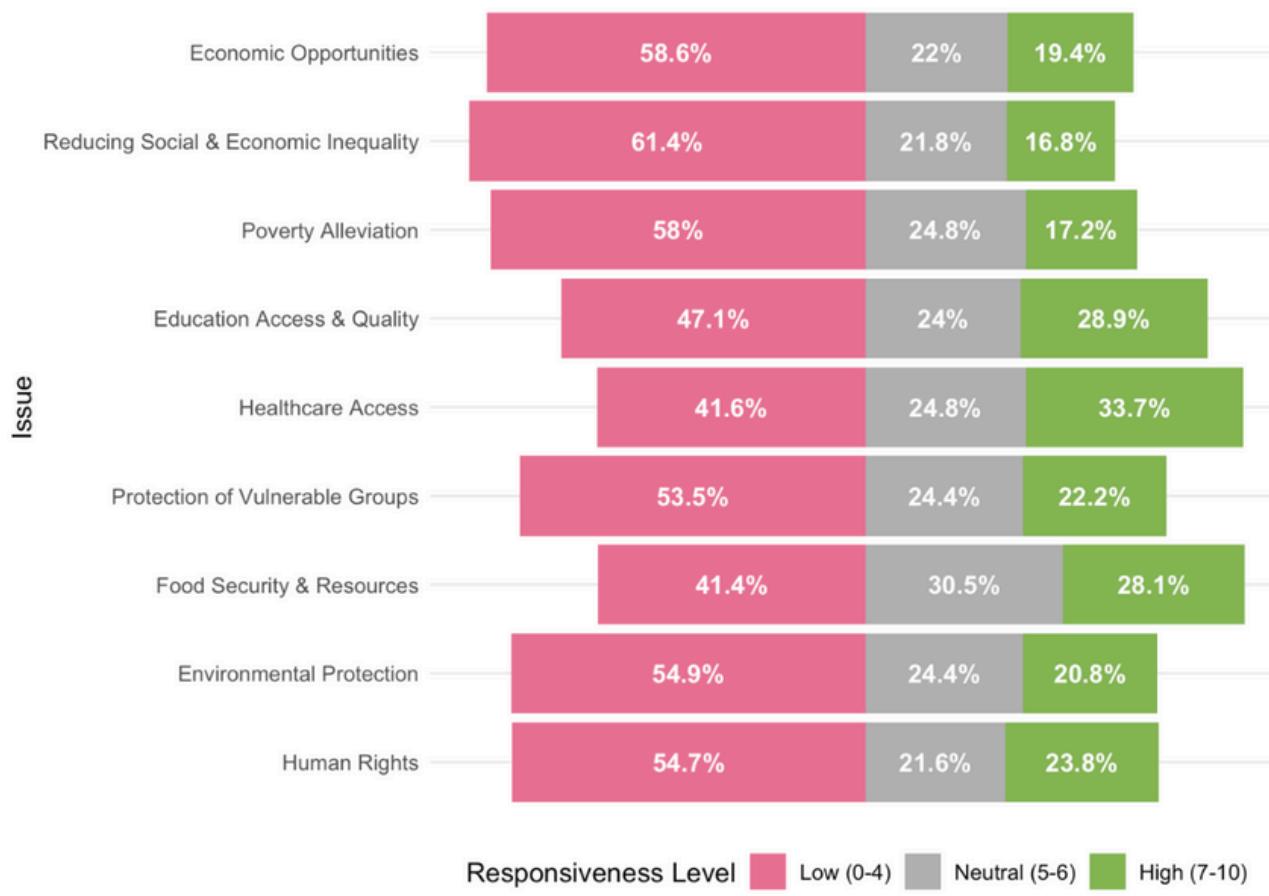


Table 16 - Government Responsiveness to Key Issues



Regional Differences in Perceptions of Government Responsiveness

Across regions, perceptions of government responsiveness to key policy issues vary significantly, revealing regional disparities in satisfaction and trust. In West Indonesia, discontent is most pronounced. A majority of respondents rated government responsiveness as low (0-4) across all policy areas, with particularly sharp concerns about reducing social and economic inequality (70.8%), poverty alleviation (64.8%), and economic opportunities (64.8%). Even in areas that typically receive more favorable views—such as healthcare access (45%) and food security (48.3)—positive assessments remain limited, with high ratings rarely exceeding 28%. The data suggests that respondents in this region perceive a significant governance gap, particularly around economic justice and public service delivery.

In Central Indonesia, perceptions are more evenly distributed, with a relatively larger proportion of respondents offering neutral or high ratings across several sectors. While dissatisfaction still exists—economic opportunities (44.4%), inequality (42.9%), and poverty (44.4%) continue to receive high low-rating percentages—there is also notable optimism. Healthcare access (50.8%), education quality (47.6%), and food security (46%) receive the highest positive evaluations in the region, suggesting that public services in these domains are viewed as more responsive. Human rights and environmental protection also perform better in Central Indonesia compared to other regions, highlighting a more nuanced or mixed perception of government performance.

East Indonesia presents a middle ground between the two extremes. Economic dissatisfaction remains high, with over 50% of respondents rating the government poorly on inequality, poverty alleviation, and economic opportunities.



However, the region also records higher levels of neutrality and moderate positivity, especially in areas like food security (30.6%), healthcare access (36.8%), and education (32.6%). On issues such as environmental protection and human rights, a larger share of respondents selected neutral responses (around 30%), indicating a less defined or more varied perception of government responsiveness.

Overall, the data underscores a regional divide in trust and satisfaction with governance. West Indonesia reflects the most severe dissatisfaction, particularly around structural issues such as poverty, inequality, and economic opportunity. Central Indonesia demonstrates a more balanced outlook, with stronger confidence in public service sectors. East Indonesia, while sharing economic concerns, shows more measured or ambivalent views, especially in non-economic policy areas. These regional differences may reflect variations in local governance quality, service delivery, political engagement, or historical inequalities, and highlight the need for more targeted, region-sensitive policy responses.



Table 17 - Government Responsiveness by Region

Differences in Perceptions of Government Responsiveness by Education Level

To allow for clearer comparisons and avoid presenting categories with very small sample sizes (fewer than 20 respondents), education levels were regrouped into two broader categories: "Primary & Secondary Education" (including Primary, Junior High, and Senior High School) and "Higher Education" (including Vocational Diplomas, Bachelor's, and Postgraduate degrees). This regrouping reveals important distinctions in how different education groups perceive government responsiveness across a range of social and economic issues.

Respondents with Higher Education tended to give lower ratings overall, with a majority viewing government responsiveness as low across most issues. For example, 66.3% rated responsiveness to inequality as low, 62.6% for economic opportunities, and 60.2% for environmental protection. In contrast, those in the Primary & Secondary Education group showed a more mixed response pattern. While low ratings were still prevalent—e.g. 57.5% for poverty alleviation—there was a higher proportion giving high ratings, especially on issues like healthcare access (37.1%) and food security (32.8%). These differences may suggest that more educated respondents are more critical or have higher expectations of government performance, while those with lower education levels may be more optimistic or less informed about these policy areas.

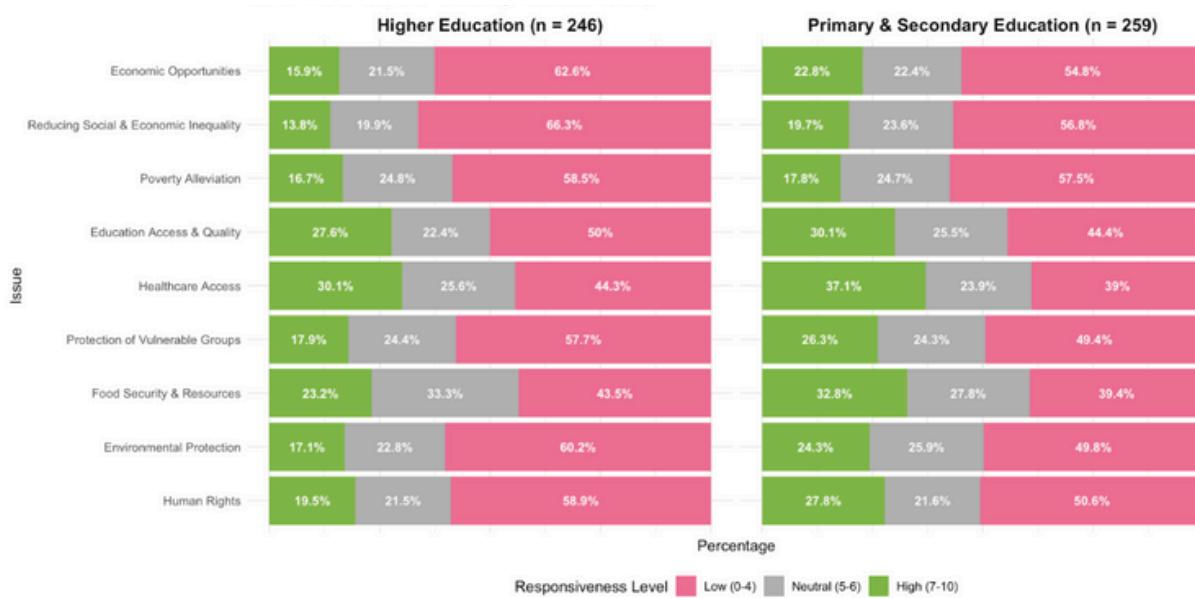


Table 18 - Government Responsiveness by Education Group

Hopes in the Government

Our interviews also unpacked the different perceptions on the government's responsiveness. Some activists perceive that the government often dismisses their demands. They see the government does not want to engage with them and accommodate their demands. Such a view is different compared to other activists who perceive that the government can still be responsive to the activists' demands. These activists believe that even though there are bureaucratic hurdles, they can still expect to influence public policy-making. The variety of the activists' perceptions of the government's responsiveness illustrates the variety of sectoral contexts in which these activists push their agenda.

The negative perception of the government's responsiveness stems from the experience of the activists in advocating issues in their sector. Activists who adopt this point of view experienced unpleasant interactions with the government. They evaluate that the government did not perform in overcoming pressing problems in society. They link such a poor response with the trend of democratic decline in Indonesia that has produced poor politicians with weak competency in handling pressing public issues. They see that the democratic decline has compromised the quality of the elected politicians. Because democratic processes are compromised, they only cultivate politicians who do not have capacity to articulate pressing issues in society. Wafa, a young activist in the health sector, affirms such an argument. He argues

“When I visited the national parliament for the international AIDS day, I witnessed that they were very incapable in what they were dealing with, especially those who were in the Commission Nine. They were very unprofessional. At least they should have known [what they are dealing with]. I think that was because the consequence of the weakening of our democracy. When they won [seats] in the 2024 General Election, it was a result of their own work in weakening democracy and they were not competent people. When we were participating in the parliament's hearing session, they only threw normative arguments because they did not know the issue”

(Wafa, December 21, 2024).



In contrast, other young activists believe that the government is still responsive to their demand, regardless of shrinking civic space. These activists do not deny that under the shrinking civic space, pushing progressive agenda could be harder than during the normal time. Nonetheless, they still see that there are opportunities for advancing their agenda through various strategies. According to the activists, lobbying through potential allies within the state or utilizing communities related to the politicians' interest are some ways through which they can exert their demands. Referring to this line of thinking invokes hopes in the way the activists perceive the government's responsiveness. Nадир, an ardent advocate of poverty issues, testifies

“I think we can [influence the government’s policy making]. We are helping the work of our friends in the parliament. For instance, our friend in the national and local parliament must have some initiatives. We can contribute by advising them...In the past, parliament members were hard to access, compared to now. Now we can access them through many doors. There is still a wide gap [between us and the policy-making arena] but that does not mean it is impossible to do. We still have so many doors [to influence them]. For instance, we can use social media or communities that are related to them or we can also request for a hearing session” (Nадир, December 28, 2024).

Other optimist activists, however, remind that although they can still access and influence the government policy making process, there are still some obstacles in exerting their agenda. The main hurdle for intervening the policy making process is the capacity of the bureaucracy in processing their demand. Thus, the government responsiveness is not something that they can take for granted. The leadership in a state ministry, for instance, might be open to cooperation with civil society actors but when the real work occurs, the other parts of the bureaucracy might not be so supportive to the initiative. They might not follow the order of the higher-ups in the bureaucracy, complicating the effort of civil society actors in pushing their initiative after the smooth beginning. Studies have shown that the state never presents as an unitary actor (Morgan and Orloff 2017). Inside the state, there are competing groups with unequal interests and power that might inhibit the activists' efforts to exert their agenda. Zuri, a passionate advocate of health for youths, explains

“I see that the relationship between democracy and the government, corporations and community is good. The problem always lies in the administrative side. For instance, last time we needed speakers and juries for our events. We asked someone from the ministry of health but there was no response until one week before the event. We asked the leadership but they said they were still busy and so on. We then asked people from the National Population and Family Planning Board and they accepted our invitation, six days before the event.” (Zuri, Desember 11, 2024)



Strengthening Civic Space: Needs and Expectations

As civic space in Indonesia continues to shrink, young people and activists are actively identifying the conditions necessary to sustain and strengthen their engagement. While many youth recognize civic space as encompassing multiple dimensions—including freedom of expression, association, and state accountability—their ability to participate is increasingly constrained by legal restrictions, repression, and limited institutional support. Despite these challenges, young activists emphasize the importance of both legal protections and grassroots organizing to safeguard civic space. Some advocate for stronger guarantees of fundamental rights, while others stress the need for unity among civil society organizations to counter restrictions effectively.

This section explores the key needs and expectations of Indonesian youth in maintaining an open civic space. It examines the conditions they see as essential for effective activism, the role of government in protecting civic freedoms, and the ways in which civil society can mobilize to resist democratic backsliding. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for developing strategies that empower young people to continue advocating for social and political change.

Ideal Support for Strengthening Civic Space

Our interviews found that the activists have different expectations on what they need for advancing their agenda under shrinking civic space. Civil society often works under multiple obstacles from the lack of material resources to the lack of capacity to carry out their activism. Under shrinking civic space, the pressure increases because activists have to consider the potential restriction and repression that might limit their activism.

Our interviews reveal that the activists acknowledge various conditions that they feel necessary for keeping their activism vibrant under duress. Nonetheless, the activists did not register a unitary response since, according to them, different pre-conditions required for sustaining their activism. Some of the activists argue that political space is necessary for preserving their activism while others advocate for a stronger unity among civil society organizations in facing shrinking civic space.

Some activists argue that the basic civic and political rights are necessary for maintaining their activism under shrinking civic space. Civic and political rights such as the freedom of expression, the freedom of assembly, the rights to protests in public space are some basic rights required for democracy to function. Without these rights, citizens cannot participate meaningfully in policy-making process that matter to their life. To guarantee that these are rights are available to citizens, the government must ensure that laws and regulations guarantee the accessibility of these rights. Nonetheless, under shrinking civic space, the government is often culpable for undermining civic space.

Thus, expecting the government to safeguard civic and political rights sounds unreasonable when at the same time, they are the party which restricts the rights. Thus, to uphold civic and political rights, some activists contend that the struggle to keep civic and political rights must be kept alive. Bernadine, an environmental activist, supports this argument



“I think the current situation of Indonesian democracy can still be improved, especially if the freedom of expression is still promoted and voiced through social media or other platforms. As long as there are no threats [to the freedom] to those who are dare to voice their opinions, then the society will not be easily afraid and retreat in advancing their rights”

(Bernadine, personal interview, January 8, 2025)

In improving their activism under a repressive situation, other activists still believe in the power of civil society in resisting and advancing their agenda under shrinking civic space. Instead of hoping for the government to assure civic and political rights, these activists rely more on their capacity as the pre-requisite for sustaining their activism. The specific capacity highlighted by these activists is the power of young people to advance a fresh agenda. They see that if they can organize Indonesian young people into a movement, that would create a strong base for propelling social changes. Thus, there must be a political moment that instigates the development of a movement among young Indonesians who have a concern to push social changes. Ella, a progressive women activists, argues

“Maybe what we need is to strengthen our grassroots base, especially among the Indonesian youths. [We consider that] because [youths] have strategic roles everywhere, in communities, villages, cities, government, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations...So maybe what we need is the Second Reformation with a different form, orienting to fix and renew [the current situation]. Indonesian youths must have roles in every space and these spaces must be connected. They must be connected to amplify the spirit of the millennials and Gen-Z because they are the two crucial generations which will continue [the struggle]” (Ella, personal interview, December 3, 2024)

Other activists harbor an opposing view on what is needed for sustaining their activism. They rest their argument on their experience in advancing their organization agenda under a situation of harsh state repression. This situation is an extreme one that it causes the activists to lower their expectation on the future of the Indonesian democracy. Moreover, experiencing such an extreme repression also limits the imagination of feasible changes. Such a situation corresponds to activists who drive change agenda in Papua. Nadav, a young activist in Papua, endorses such an assessment



In Papua, we are treated “special.” The democratic space in Papua is always surveilled and tightly guarded by the security forces. If we assess from public dialogues and discourses, the politics of security exercised by the Prabowo’s administration is very disconcerting because there is a specific policy on the national strategic projects. We can see clearly that development projects in Papua is no longer under the responsibility of local governments.

They are already taken over by the military and the police so [this move] is not only weakening non-governmental organizations, civil society or indigenous communities in Papua but also undermining [the authority] of the provincial, district and city governments in Papua because they have to submit to the national [government’s] policy and they have to submit.

If they did not obey they will get a “red card”³ from the president (Nadav, personal interview, January 4, 2025)



Image Source: The Jakarta Post

³Red card refers to the rule in football to send off players who have committed serious offenses (e.g., violent conducts).

Youth Engagement: Patterns and Priorities

Youth engagement in civic life is a crucial indicator of democratic participation, reflecting the ways in which young Indonesians contribute to social and political change. However, participation in civil society organizations, activism, and digital advocacy varies across gender, region, and personal priorities. While some engage actively in structured organizations, others prefer online discussions or prioritize specific issues such as human rights, education, or environmental protection. Additionally, differences emerge in the level of commitment young people are willing to dedicate to these causes, influenced by regional and socioeconomic factors.

This section examines key aspects of youth engagement, including participation in social movement organizations (SMOs), the role of social media in expressing political views, regional variations in civic priorities, and the extent of commitment to advocacy efforts. By analyzing these patterns, this study highlights the diverse ways in which young Indonesians navigate civic space and the structural factors that shape their involvement.

Participation in SMOs

The data shows notable gender differences in participation in civil society organizations. Among female respondents, a slight majority (53.93%) reported not participating, while 46.07% had engaged in such activities. In contrast, male respondents demonstrated higher engagement, with 69.06% participating and only 30.94% not participating. For non-binary individuals, participation was evenly split at 50%. Meanwhile, among those who chose not to disclose their gender or identified as "Others", 57.14% participated, while 42.86% did not. These findings suggest that men are more likely to engage in civil society activities than women, while non-binary and other gender groups show more balanced participation rates. The gendered differences in civic engagement may reflect varying social expectations, barriers to participation, or differing levels of interest in activism across gender identities.

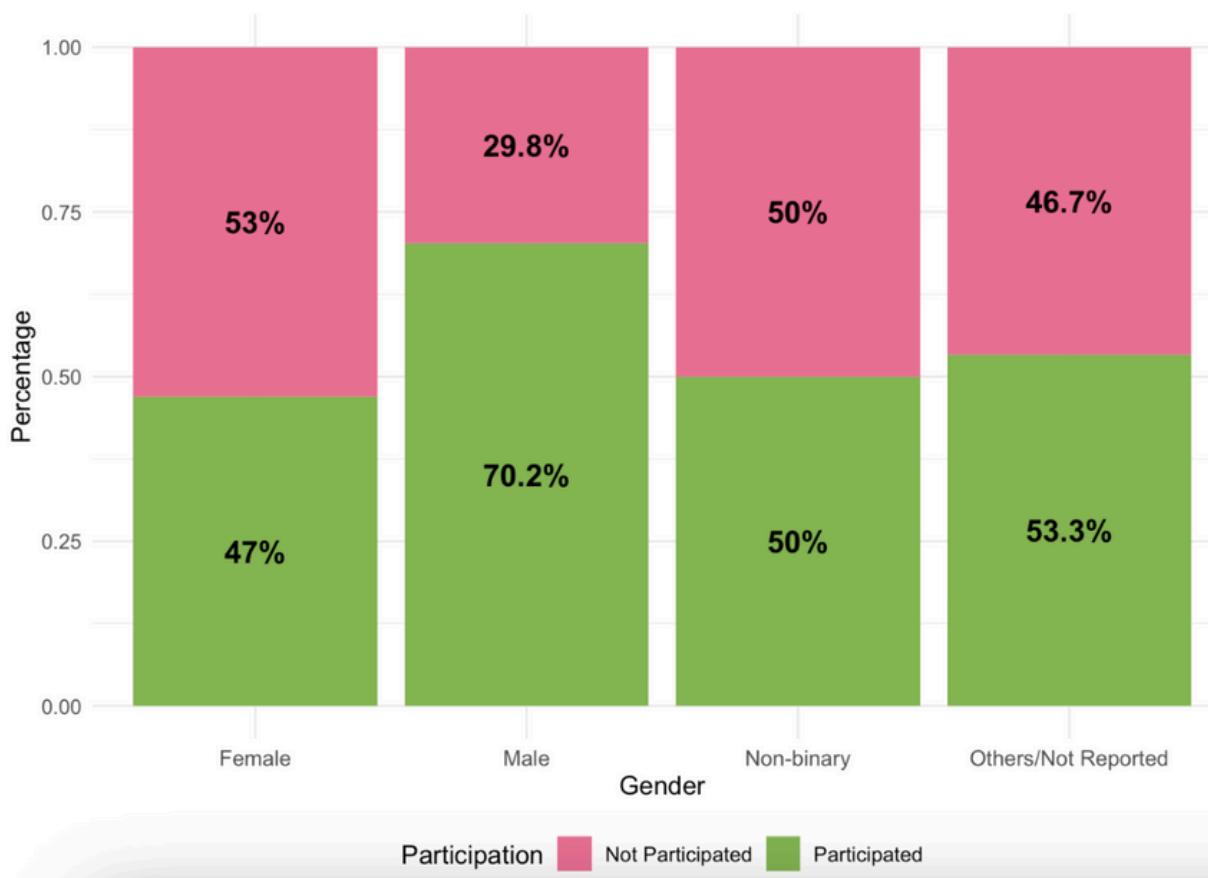


Table 19 - Participation in Civil Society Organizations by Gender

The data also compares participation in civil society organizations between two education groups. "Primary & Secondary Education" includes individuals whose highest level of education is primary school, junior high, or senior high school. "Higher Education" includes those who have completed vocational diplomas, bachelor's degrees, or postgraduate studies. Among those with higher education, 59.3% reported participating in civil society organizations, compared to 54.1% of those with primary or secondary education. While participation is slightly higher among the more educated group, both show relatively strong engagement, suggesting that civic involvement is not exclusive to higher education levels.

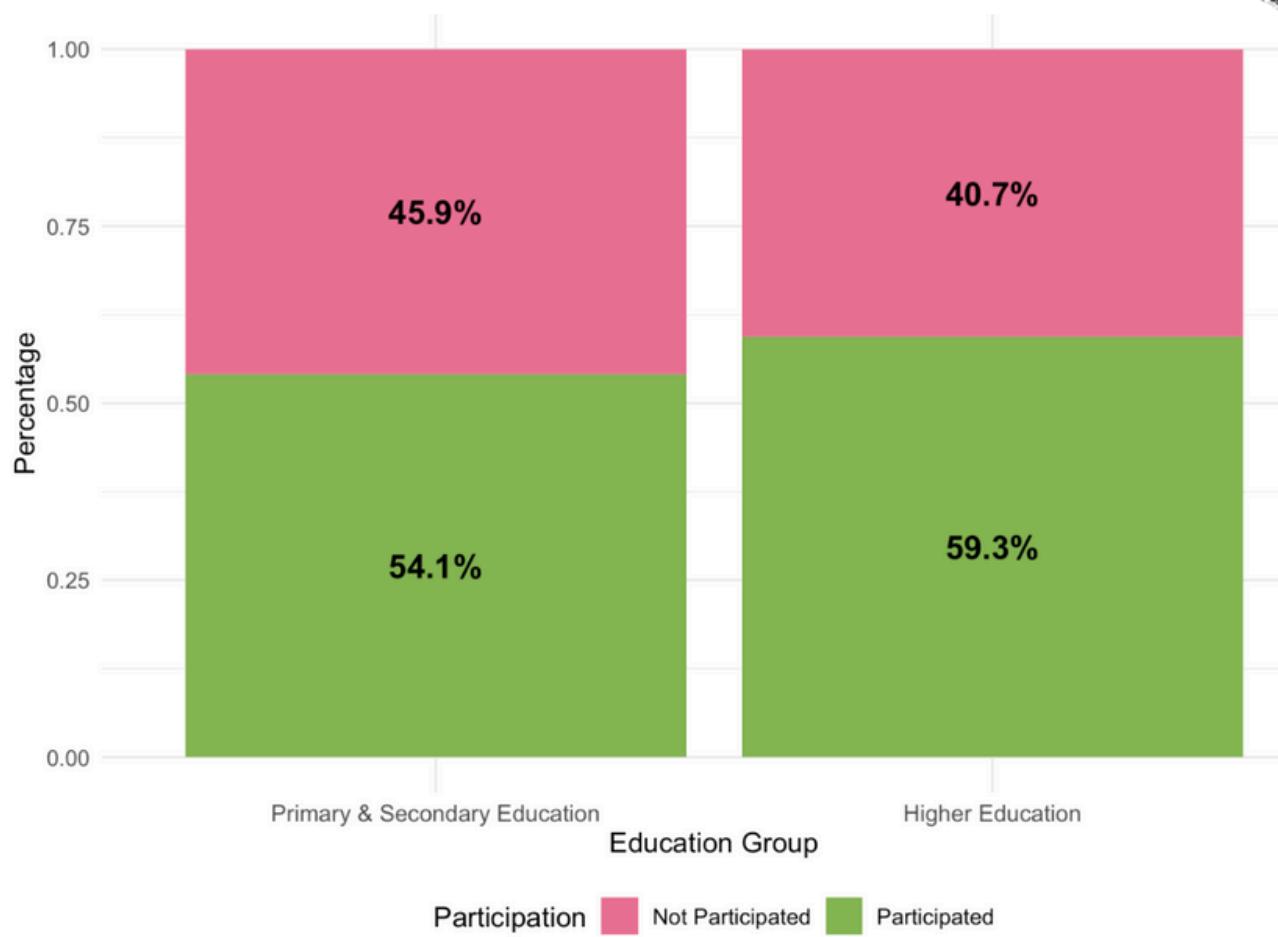


Table 20 - Participation in Civil Society Organizations by Education group



Voicing Social and Political Views on Social Media

The survey data reveals varying levels of engagement in voicing social and political views on social media. The largest share of respondents (43.56%) reported that they "sometimes" participate in such discussions, indicating a moderate and occasional level of involvement. This is followed by 21.98% who are "often involved" and 21.19% who "rarely" engage, suggesting that the majority of respondents fall somewhere in the middle of the participation spectrum. On the extremes, 7.13% described themselves as "active and consistently involved," while a nearly equal 6.14% reported being "not involved at all." These findings indicate that while most individuals contribute to social and political discourse online to some extent, only a small minority are either fully committed or completely disengaged.

How often do you voice your opinion or political issues?

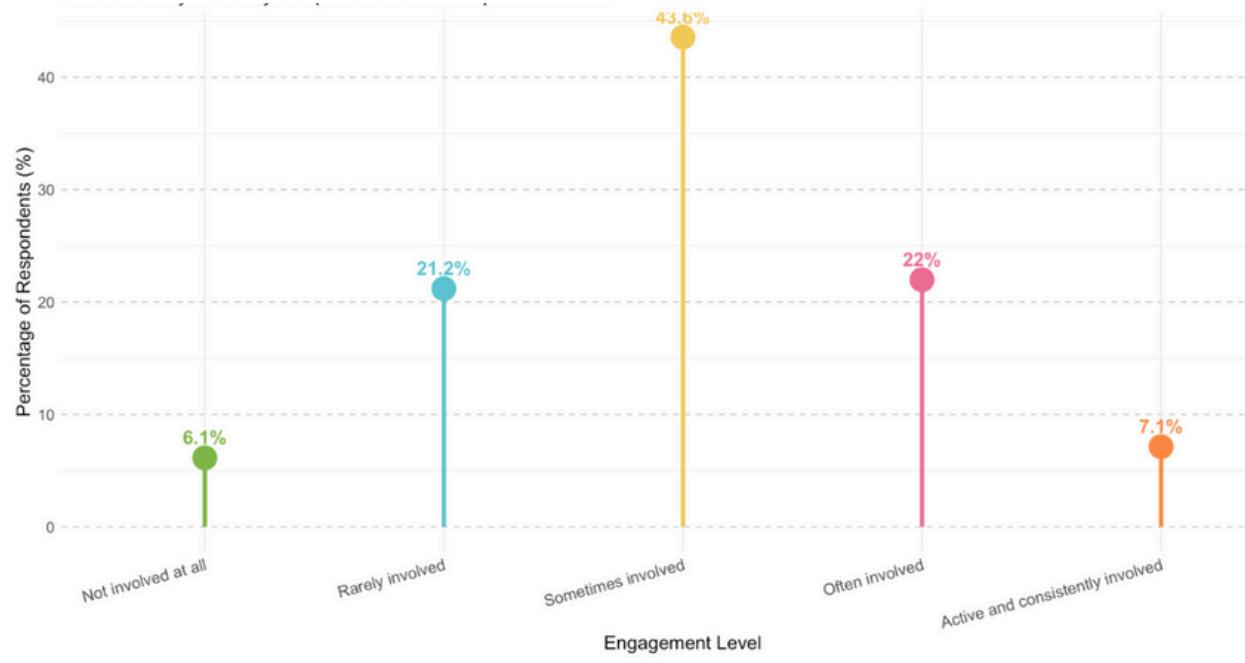


Table 21 - Frequency of Expressing Social & Political Views on Social Media



Variations in Civic Engagement Priorities

The findings reveal key motivations driving civic engagement among respondents, with a strong emphasis on humanitarian and human rights issues, selected by 69.5% of participants. This suggests a deep concern for justice, equality, and the protection of fundamental freedoms. Improving access and quality of education follows closely at 67.1%, highlighting the value placed on educational equity and its role in shaping opportunity and empowerment.

Environmental protection also ranks highly at 50.9%, indicating that sustainability and climate concerns are central to youth civic priorities. Additional motivations include access to healthcare services (49.7%), employment and economic empowerment (48.1%), and poverty alleviation (40%), all of which reflect a broader focus on social welfare and economic security. Other frequently cited issues include reducing social and economic inequality (40.6%) and food security and natural resource management (35.8%), signaling an awareness of both structural injustices and resource-based challenges.

Notably, only 6.1% of respondents selected “Other,” suggesting that the predefined categories captured the vast majority of civic concerns. Altogether, the data illustrates that youth civic engagement is driven by a multi-issue orientation, rooted in both rights-based and welfare-based motivations, with a strong interest in equity, sustainability, and institutional accountability.



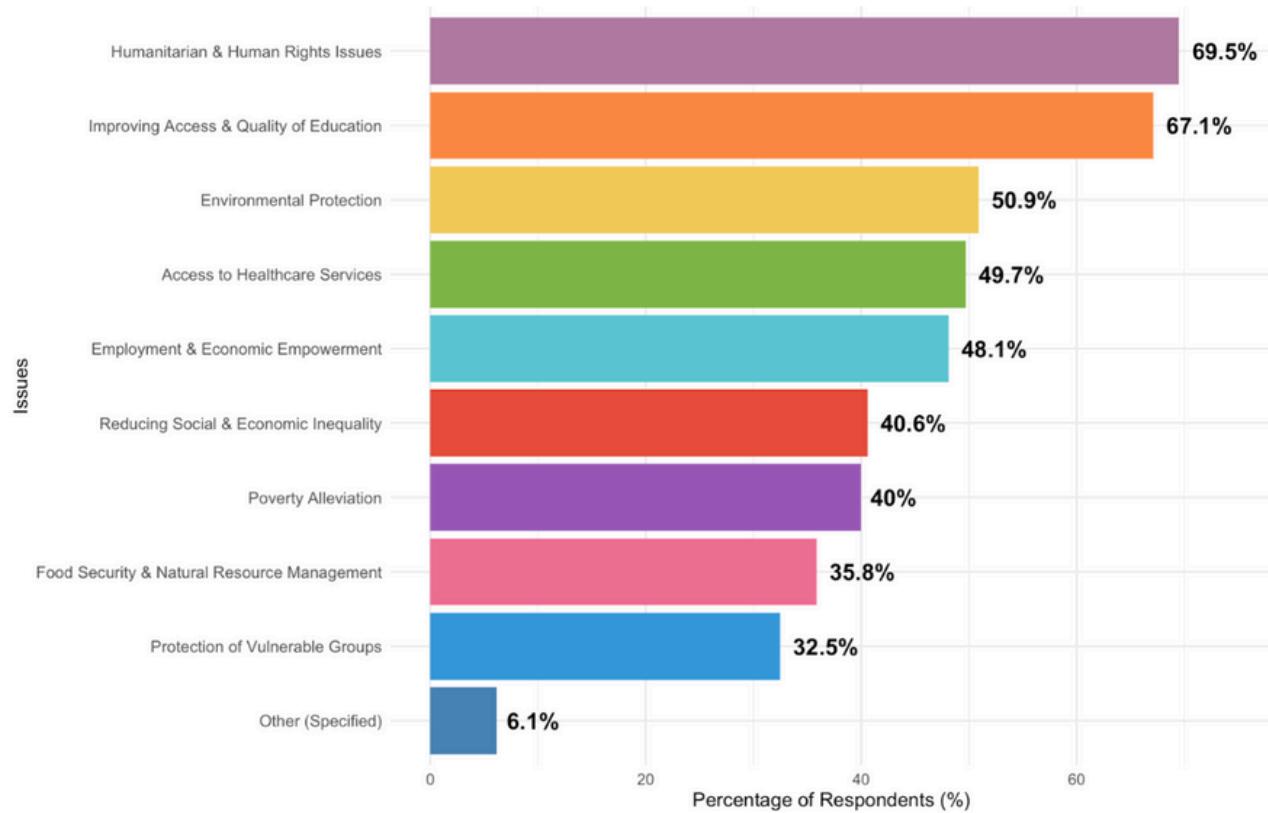


Table 22 - Motivating Issues for Engagement

Breaking down civic engagement motivations by region reveals meaningful variations shaped by local priorities and challenges. While Humanitarian & Human Rights Issues and Education consistently rank among the top concerns across all regions, their relative importance—and the emphasis on other issues—varies significantly. In West Indonesia, the leading motivations are Humanitarian & Human Rights Issues (16.1%), Education (16.0%), and Employment & Economic Empowerment (11.6%). These results suggest a strong focus on social justice, access to education, and job opportunities, likely reflecting concerns over inequality, governance, and the economy in urban and semi-urban contexts.

In Central Indonesia, the pattern is somewhat similar, with top concerns being Education (15.2%), Humanitarian & Human Rights Issues (15.2%), and Healthcare Access (11.7%). While social justice remains central, the slightly higher emphasis on healthcare suggests greater concern for basic service delivery and public welfare. Economic-related issues such as employment and poverty are present but less dominant compared to other regions, indicating a relatively more balanced distribution of civic priorities in this area.

In East Indonesia, youth are not only concerned with Humanitarian & Human Rights Issues (15.4%) and Education (13.6%), but also place notable emphasis on Environmental Protection (13.4%)—a priority that ranks higher here than in any other region. This reflects specific environmental and resource-based challenges affecting communities in the East, such as land use, extractive industries, and climate vulnerability. Access to Healthcare (12.7%) and Food Security & Natural Resource Management (9.2%) also figure prominently, suggesting that livelihood, sustainability, and basic needs are tightly intertwined with civic concerns. Overall, the regional breakdown underscores that while core values like justice and education are shared nationwide, youth civic engagement is strongly influenced by local conditions, pointing to the need for context-specific approaches in policy and youth outreach.

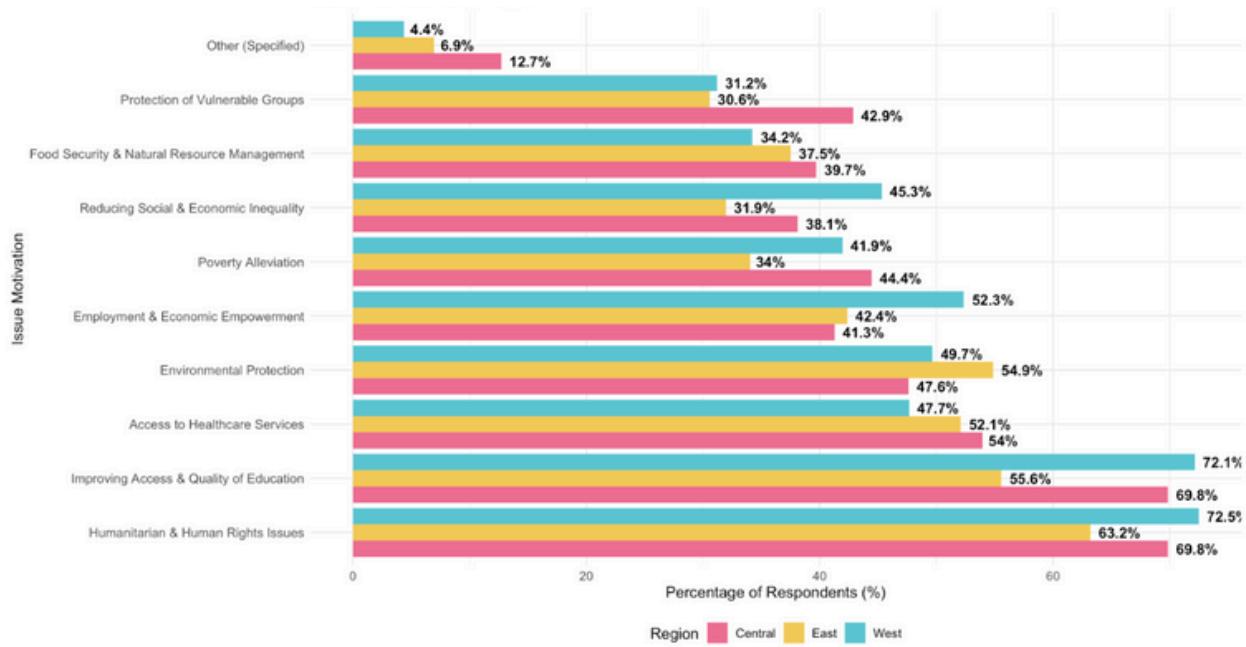


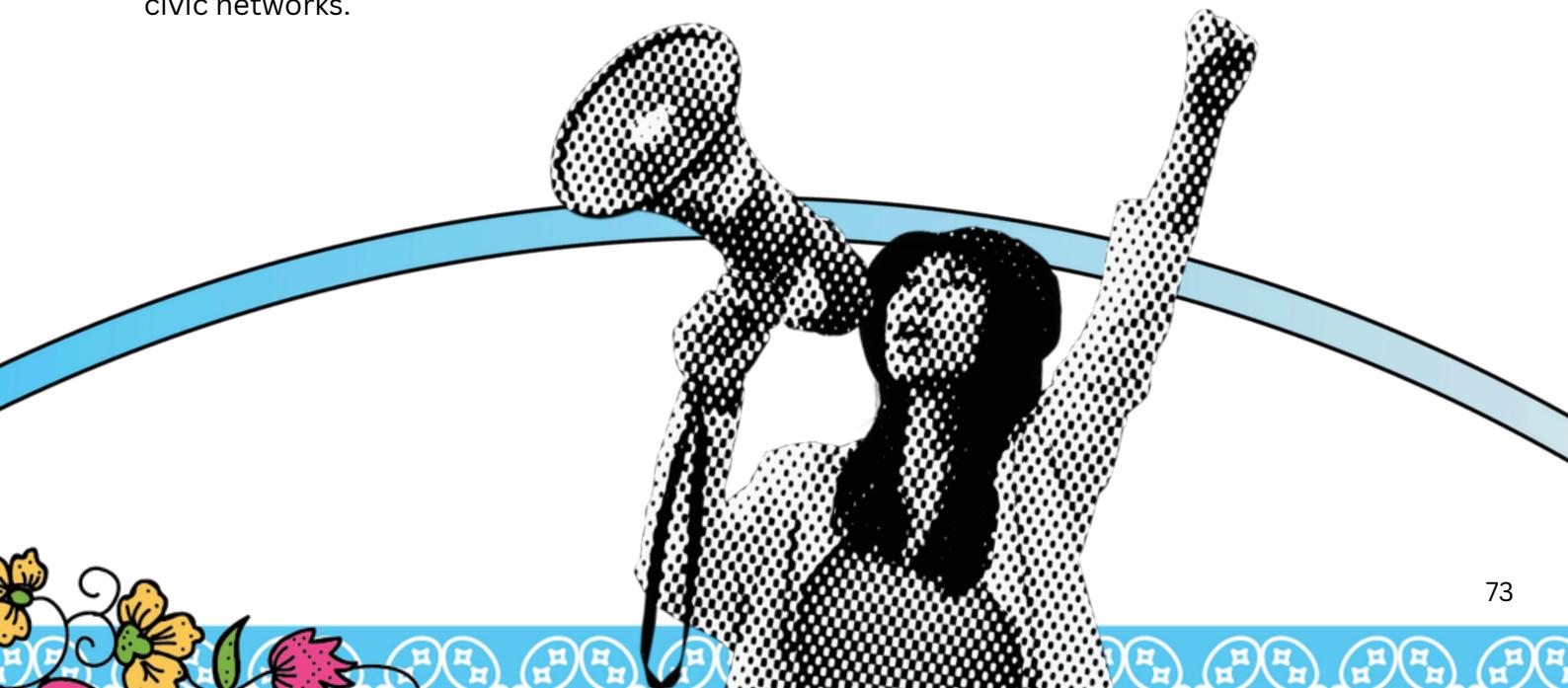
Table 23 - Issue Motivations by Region

Commitment of Resources

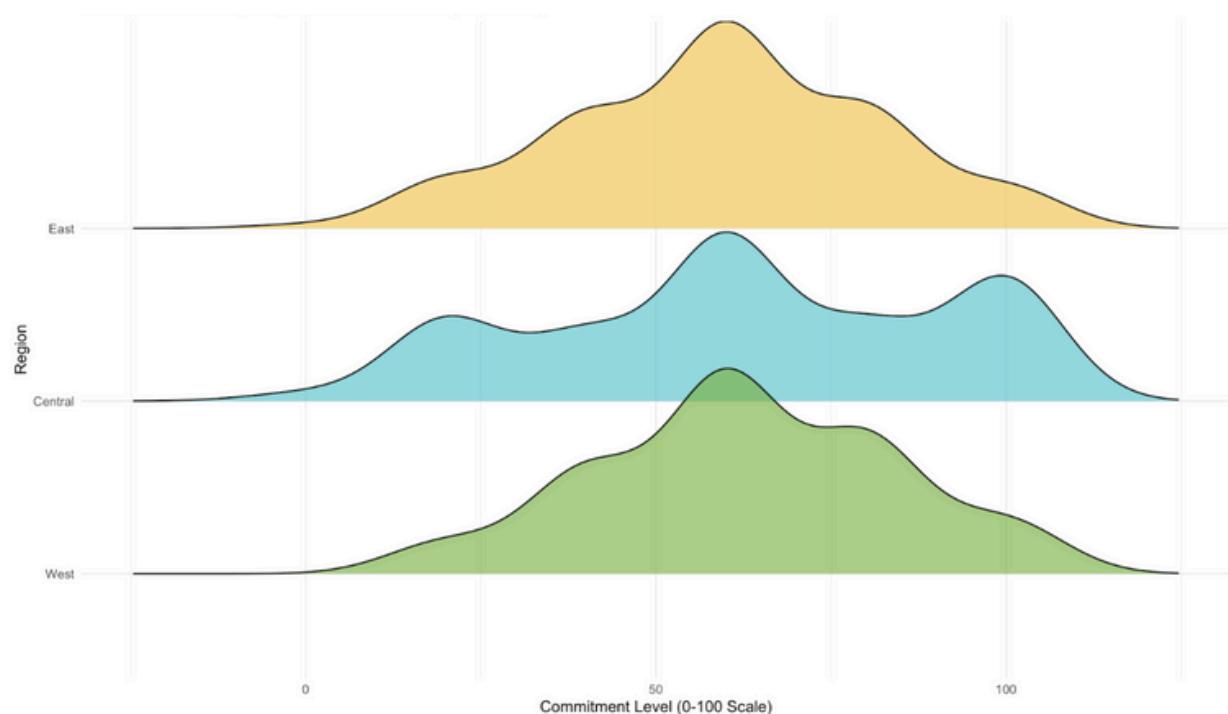
The level of commitment—measured in willingness to dedicate money, time, and effort to support causes—varies across regions, revealing differences in youth engagement capacity and motivation. In West Indonesia, respondents demonstrated the highest levels of commitment, with 22.5% selecting a score of 60 (on a 0–100 scale), the most common level across all regions. This was followed by 15.4% selecting 80 and 11.7% selecting 40, indicating a substantial share willing to dedicate moderate to high resources toward civic causes. Notably, 6.1% expressed full commitment at 100, suggesting a strong base of highly engaged youth in the region. Only a small minority chose lower levels, with 3.6% selecting 20.

In Central Indonesia, commitment levels were somewhat more conservative. While 60 remained the most frequent choice (4.0%), fewer respondents selected higher levels like 80 (1.8%) or 100 (3.0%). Lower levels of commitment such as 40 (1.6%) and 20 (2.0%) were also less common, and only 0.2% indicated no willingness to commit resources at all. These patterns suggest that while there is a core of moderately committed youth in Central Indonesia, high-intensity engagement is less prevalent, potentially due to resource limitations or differing civic exposure.

East Indonesia showed the most even distribution of commitment levels. Around 10.7% selected 60, the most common choice, followed by 6.3% selecting 80 and 5.9% choosing 40. While a smaller percentage (2.2%) expressed full commitment at 100, and a few (0.2%) selected 0, the spread of responses suggests a balanced but cautious engagement profile. These figures indicate a willingness among Eastern Indonesian youth to support causes, but likely in ways that reflect varying local conditions, such as economic realities or access to civic networks.



Overall, the data suggest regional differences not only in the level of commitment but potentially in the capacity or opportunity to engage deeply. The West appears to have a more engaged and resource-willing youth base, while the Central and East regions show more moderate levels of commitment.



*Table 24 - Commitment of Resources by Region
(Distribution of financial, time, and effort commitment 0 - 11 scale)*

While all three regions reflect active youth engagement, variations in economic capacity, lived experiences of governance, peer networks, and localized issue salience contribute to differing levels and forms of commitment across the country. These differences are consistent with broader patterns observed in youth civic participation globally, where structural inequalities, access to resources, and the availability of safe civic spaces shape how and to what extent young people engage. In contexts where economic pressure is high and institutional trust is low, youth are often motivated to act out of frustration or necessity, while in more stable environments, engagement may be more issue-specific or shaped by opportunities for structured participation.

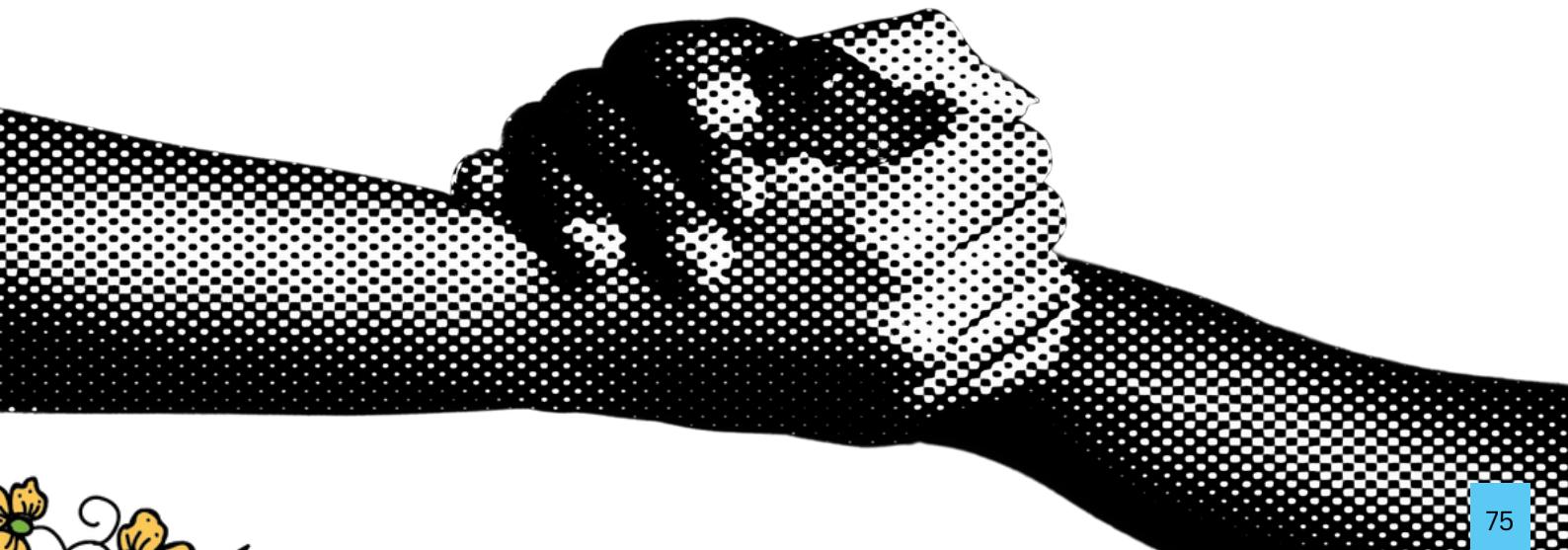


In West Indonesia, youth appear to be both highly critical of government performance and strongly committed to civic causes. The region reports the highest dissatisfaction with issues such as poverty alleviation (64.8%), economic inequality (70.8%), and employment opportunities (64.8%). Yet this dissatisfaction translates into engagement: 58% of respondents report having participated in civic activities, and the West shows the highest willingness to commit resources, with 22.5% selecting a commitment level of 60 and 15.4% choosing 80. While a sizable portion (39.9%) live on less than Rp 1 million per month, this does not seem to dampen their willingness to act—suggesting that civic frustration, access to urban peer networks (37.5% discuss political issues with peers), and stronger exposure to activism may be driving more active participation.

In contrast, the Central and East regions show more moderate or issue-specific forms of commitment.

In Central Indonesia, economic conditions are relatively more stable, with the highest share of respondents spending Rp 1–2 million monthly (42.9%), yet willingness to commit time and resources is lower, with only 3% selecting full commitment (100) and most responses clustering around moderate levels. The region still shows active participation (55.6%) and comparatively high trust in public services like healthcare and education, which may temper the urgency to mobilize.

In East Indonesia, the distribution of commitment is more even, with fewer respondents selecting high-intensity engagement, likely due to the highest concentration of low-income youth (44.9% spending under Rp 1 million per month). While dissatisfaction with economic justice remains, engagement here appears more responsive to issue-specific challenges—particularly environmental degradation and food insecurity, which rank higher than in other regions. Political discussion within peer and community networks (41.3%) remains strong, suggesting that while direct action may be constrained by economic realities, civic awareness and potential for future engagement remain significant.



These patterns demonstrate that youth engagement is not monolithic.

Rather, it is shaped by a complex interplay of material conditions, social dynamics, and political experience. Regions where dissatisfaction meets opportunity and networked support are more likely to produce highly committed actors, while areas with more diffuse or localized concerns may express engagement through dialogue, community work, or thematic advocacy. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing more inclusive civic initiatives and ensuring that youth across all regions are equipped—and empowered—to participate meaningfully in shaping democratic life.



Strategies Against Shrinking Civic Space

Our interviews also found, under shrinking civic space, the variety of youth engagements with the government as the main target of their activism. Some observers have documented how civil society organizations tend to retreat from their activisms due to the fear of bearing the consequence of repression.

Our interviews, however, recorded how Indonesian youths are still persistent in pushing their agenda although they have different ideals regarding tactics that they should apply. Some of these youth activists focus on expanding their social base. This view indicates that there is still a room to manoeuvre regardless the shrinking civic space. Based on such an understanding, they enlarge their social base by weaving new networks and collaborating intensively with youths, the main supporter of our interviewee's organizations.

Other activists favor street protests as the main tactics to press the government. The supporter of this tactic see that shrinking civic space does not necessarily entail the narrowing of space to organize street protests. This selection of tactics suggests that street protests continue to be the popular repertoire to exert their demand.

Because their work mainly targets the youth, it is not surprising that our informants seek to expand their social base by targeting young people to join their cause. Youths are seen as the potential target of empowerment and coalition partners because they constitute a significant segment of the population. According to the Statistics Central Bureau, Indonesian youths constitute 61% (65 million) of the total population (280 million) (Biro Pusat Statistik 2024). This number poses a potential source of support to various political agenda promoted by civil society organizations. Some of the youths, especially those enrolling in universities, also have free time and space to participate in activism (Altbach 1970; 1989). While they are in the campus, they also relatively have a safe space to experiment with activism that they favor.

Thus, they become a potential target for civil society empowerment. Aside from these considerations, the activists also mention that youths often express that they want to be heard. The older generation and authority tend neglect them in formulating policies related to them. Although some policy-making processes might include them, the policy makers tend to treat them only as a token. Tapping into such a gap between policy-making process and the Indonesian youths, some of the activists argue that they seek to work with the youths to address the gap between policy-making process and the Indonesian youths. Eleni, an young enthusiast mental health activist, opines

“Our organization focuses on mental health and we seek to collaborate with Indonesian youths so that they can be more aware of their mental health... In relation to mental health, we vigorously ask young Indonesians to care more about mental health by organizing public forums, webinar, campaigns. [We aim] to invoke feelings that they have friends and not feel alone. Most of them need to be listened without being judged. Our forums create the feeling that they are protected, have many friends and not being alone”

(Eleni, personal interview, February 07, 2025)

For other activists, they must advocate their agenda under duress due to the sensitivity of their issue. In contrast to Eleni's experience whose advocacy is situated in an urban middle class setting, Indonesian youths who work in, Papua, for instance, have to be more strategic. They utilize public forums not only to absorb political aspirations from Papuan youths but also to fight off the government's propaganda against their movement. Organizing public forums in the Papuan context is also useful for enlarging social bases for the resistance against the national government. Manda, an activists in Papua, testifies



“Our organization employs advocacy strategies that seek to strengthen our internal organization by weaving solidarity with other movements and disseminating propaganda through media and public discussions in campuses. We opted this strategy because our activities are often obstructed. Media campaigns and public discussions open the possibility to challenge the negative message directed to our movement. Compared to the previous era, we focus more on strengthening our internal organization and building solidarity across sectors due to the limitation of democratic space for Papuan students” (Manda, January 2, 2025).

Other activists seek to learn from the history of social movements that blend social activism with social and political theories. Such a romanticism stems from the conviction that mass protests are inseparable from theories. Left-leaning activists often adopt this stance, underscoring, for instance, the unity between revolutionary theories and practices. Within this argument, there is also a belief about the importance of organizations as a vehicle for activism. Organizations are perceived vital by the activists because they provide activists with a platform to set objectives, gather resources, and manage resources for collective purposes. Utilizing organizations, the activists can center their activities. Bani, a left-leaning youth activist, argues

“We have learned from social movement in the early twentieth century... There are two elements in a people’s movement, first is mass protests and, second, ideological organizations. We aim to blend those two elements [in our movement], often called as the integration of theory and practice. So, we want to intervene [by using] aksi (mass protests) and, secondly, we organize public discussions and political education activities. We routinely organize those activists three times a year. We have our own curriculum that fuses the history of political ideologies and the theory of social movements...In practice, we not only rely on street demonstrations but in many occasions we also open book stands, we are also involved in Kamisan⁴ and so on”

(Bani, personal interview, February 9, 2025)

⁴Kamisan is weekly protest held every Thursday by human rights victims and civil society organizations. The protest demands the government to prosecute human rights violators in. It has been organizing protest since 2007.

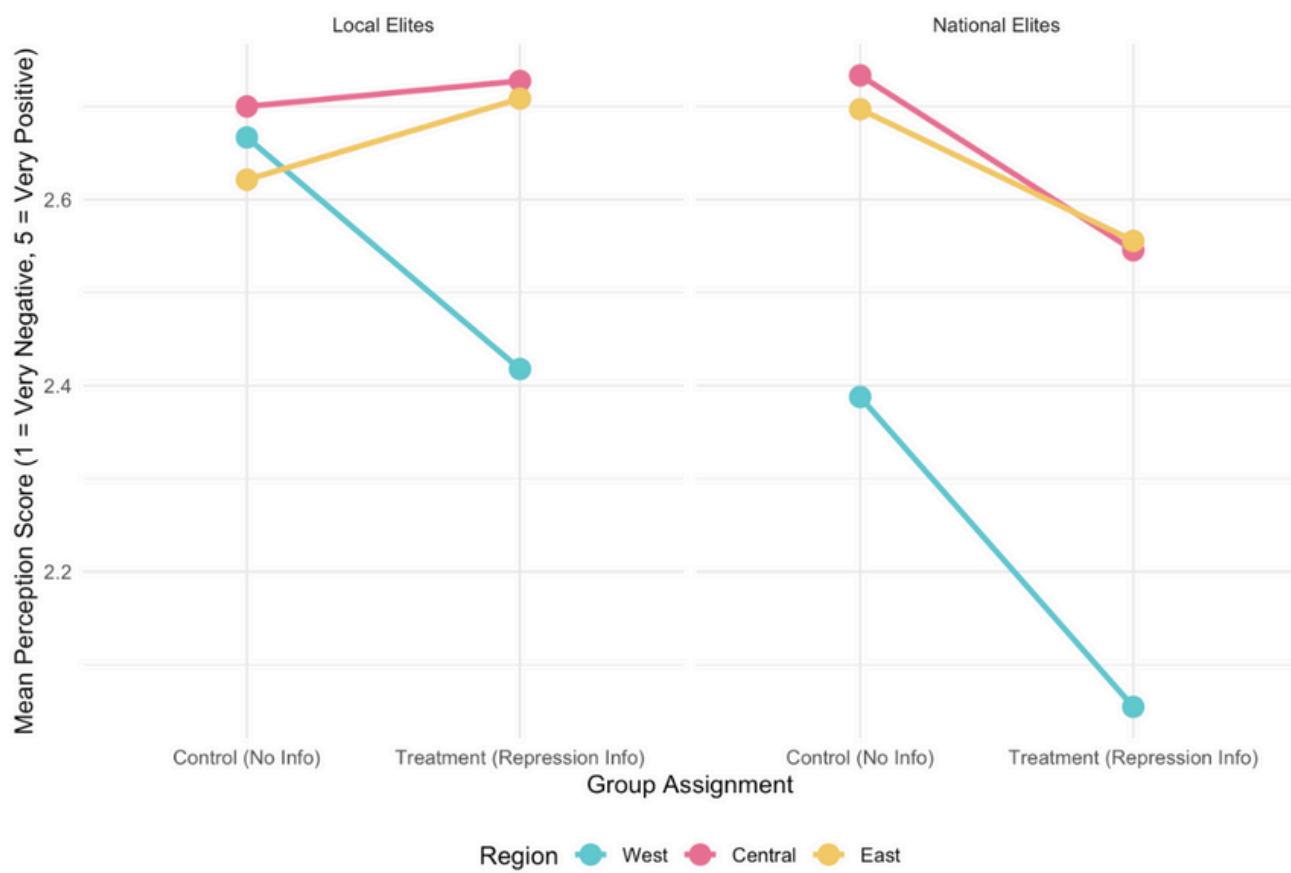


Does Exposure to Information on Shrinking Civic Space Affects Youth?

For an experiment study, we assigned survey participants to either a control group or an intervention group. The intervention group receives a brief informational prompt about cases of activist persecution in Indonesia over the past seven years. This approach assesses whether increased awareness of activist persecution influences youth perceptions of civil space, politicians, and their willingness to participate in social movements.

Experiment 1: Perception of Elites

The experiment reveals significant regional variation in how Indonesian youth respond to repression-related information when evaluating political elites, pointing to distinct political sensitivities shaped by local contexts. The most pronounced effect was found in West Indonesia, where exposure to information about repression significantly reduced perceptions of both national and local elites. The average perception score for national elites dropped from 2.39 in the control group to 2.05 in the treatment group ($p = 0.004$), while for local elites, scores declined from 2.67 to 2.42 ($p = 0.022$). ANOVA and Tukey post hoc tests confirm that this shift was not only statistically significant, but also greater than in any other region.



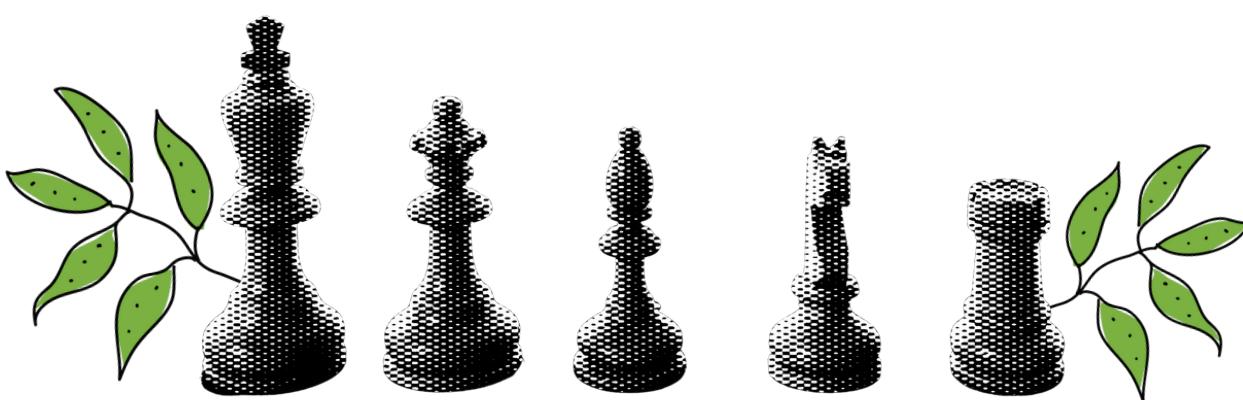
*Table 25 - Effect of Repression Information on Elite Perception
 (Mean perception scores by treatment condition and region)*

These results suggest that youth in the West are particularly responsive to narratives of repression—likely due to a combination of factors such as greater political awareness, historical grievances, and lower trust in authority. This region also showed the lowest baseline trust in national elites, and the largest drop following treatment, reinforcing the idea that West Indonesia harbors deeper skepticism toward centralized power and is more attuned to rights violations.

In Central Indonesia, the effects were more muted. Although perceptions of national elites declined in the treatment group (from 2.73 to 2.55), the difference was only marginally significant ($p = 0.067$), and no statistically meaningful change was observed for local elites. The region's more moderate political climate, combined with a generally more favorable perception of public services—as reflected in earlier survey sections—may buffer against the kind of sharp attitude shifts seen in the West.

The East presented an even more distinct pattern: no measurable decline in perceptions of national elites (2.70 vs. 2.56, $p = 0.38$) and a slight increase in perceptions of local elites (2.62 to 2.71, $p = 0.54$). Although these differences were not statistically significant, they suggest the possibility of counterintuitive effects—where exposure to repression-related narratives may actually reinforce trust in local elites who are perceived as more responsive or less complicit in central government actions.

These findings underscore that youth responses to state repression are not formed in a vacuum—they are shaped by regional political identity, local histories of state authority, and patterns of decentralization that influence how power is experienced on the ground. However, structural context alone does not fully account for these differences. To understand why some regions, like the West, exhibit sharper reactions than others, it is also necessary to consider how individual-level factors—particularly education and activism—interact with these broader dynamics to shape political interpretation and responsiveness.



Education level likely plays an important mediating role in how youth interpret and respond to politically charged information such as repression-related narratives. As earlier findings on civic space understanding demonstrated, higher education—particularly at the bachelor's level—is associated with more nuanced and comprehensive conceptualizations of civic life. Among respondents with a bachelor's degree (S1/D4), over 42% reported either quite or fully understanding the concept of civic space, compared to just 18.8% among vocational diploma holders, and significantly lower rates among those with only a senior high school education. This suggests that educational attainment not only enhances civic literacy but also strengthens the capacity to critically evaluate political events, recognize signs of democratic backsliding, and connect personal experiences with broader systemic issues.

When viewed alongside the experimental results, this pattern is especially salient in West Indonesia, where youth demonstrated the strongest decline in perceptions of both national and local elites after being exposed to information about repression. While the share of bachelor's degree holders in the West (45.1%) is slightly lower than in the Central region (49.2%), the West also has the highest rate of youth who reported participating in activism (58%), compared to 55.6% in the Central and 55.8% in the East. This combination of relatively high education and strong activist engagement likely contributes to heightened political sensitivity. Activism may offer practical exposure to issues of state repression, legal overreach, and elite impunity—experiences that reinforce the interpretive frameworks provided by formal education. In the West, education and activism appear to interact synergistically, fostering a political environment where youth are more attuned to elite behavior and more willing to revise their views when confronted with evidence of injustice.

In contrast, Central and East Indonesia, while also demonstrating strong activist participation and solid educational backgrounds, show more tempered responses to the experimental treatment. Both regions have slightly lower shares of bachelor's degree holders—44.2% in the East and a comparable 49.2% in the Central region—but a larger proportion of their respondents hold only a senior high school education (51.4% in the East and 42.9% in the Central). These groups may have less consistent exposure to civic education, critical media literacy, or participatory political spaces, which could result in more moderate or static attitudes toward elite figures. While activist engagement in these regions remains substantial, the absence of a reinforcing educational context may limit the interpretive tools available to youth when processing information about repression. Taken together, these findings highlight how education and activism intersect to shape political responsiveness, with the West's combination of both factors creating a particularly fertile ground for critical engagement.



Experiment 2: Commitment to a Cause

This experiment aimed to assess how exposure to information about government repression influences individuals' willingness to commit resources—time, money, and effort—to activism. Additionally, it examined whether past activism experience and regional differences shaped these commitments. Participants were randomly assigned to either a treatment group, where they received information about repression, or a control group, which did not receive such information. Their responses on resource commitment were then analyzed based on prior activism engagement and regional background.

The results indicate that exposure to repression-related information did not have a statistically significant effect on the amount of resources individuals were willing to commit. Participants in the treatment group did not significantly differ from those in the control group ($F(1,453) = 0.45, p = 0.501$; estimate = 1.32, $p = 0.501$), suggesting that learning about government repression neither increased nor decreased their willingness to invest time, money, or energy into activism. This finding is consistent with well-established arguments in the social movement literature, which hold that grievance alone is insufficient to spur civic action. As noted by Klandermans and Oegema (1987) and Passy and Giugni (2001), while repression may generate discontent, bystanders are unlikely to act unless they are embedded in social networks that provide opportunities for participation, exposure to activist norms, and organizational support. These social infrastructures help translate grievance into action by offering individuals the values, goals, and strategies necessary to navigate collective action.

In contrast, prior activism experience emerged as a strong and highly significant predictor of resource commitment ($F(1,453) = 27.79, p < 0.001$; estimate = 10.41, $p < 0.001$). Individuals with a history of activism consistently reported greater willingness to commit resources compared to those with no prior experience, regardless of treatment condition. Post hoc Tukey tests confirm that the difference between activists and non-activists is robust across both the control group (estimate = 9.41, $p = 0.0047$) and treatment group (estimate = 11.43, $p < 0.001$). These results support longstanding claims in the literature (e.g., McAdam 1989, 1999) that past activism fosters a self-reinforcing cycle of participation. Individuals who have previously participated in demonstrations, organizing efforts, or advocacy campaigns are likely to have internalized key routines and expectations. These prior experiences provide psychological predictability and reduce uncertainty, making future participation feel more familiar and less costly—ultimately increasing the likelihood of sustained engagement.



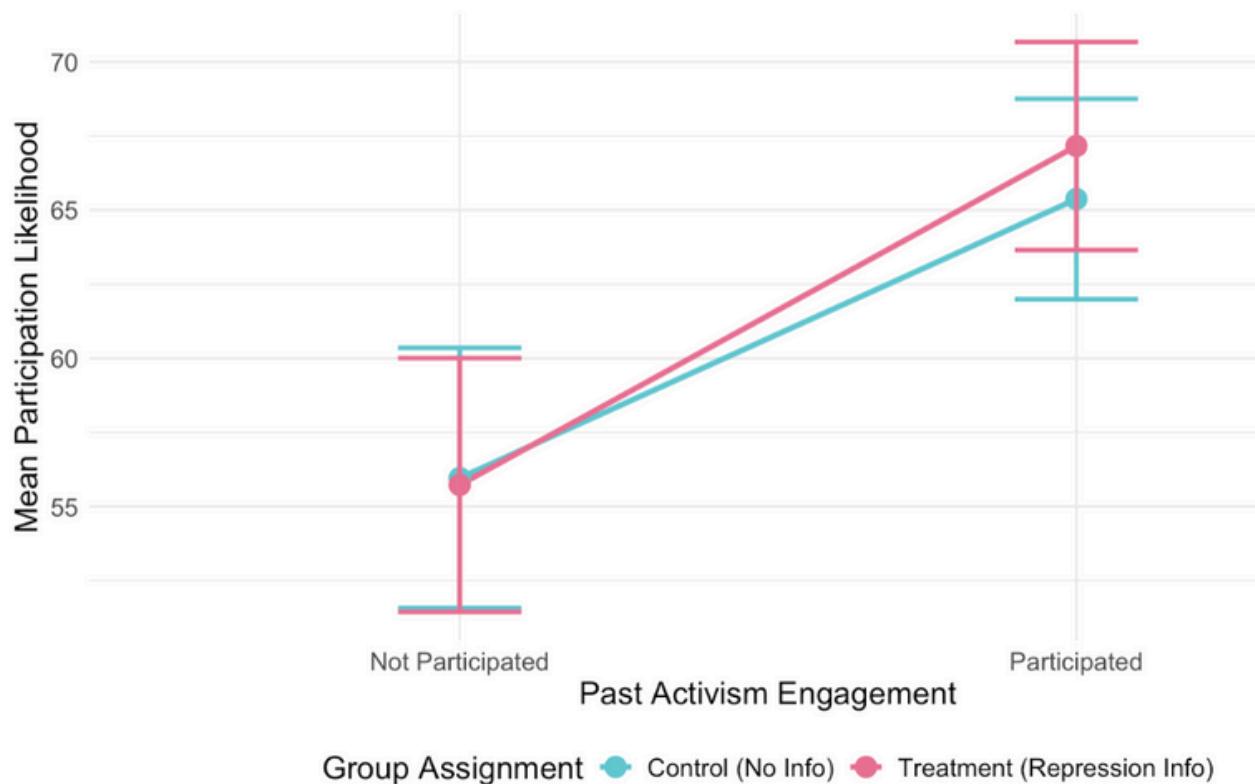


Table 26 - Effect of Repression Information on Resource Committed (Grouped by Prior Activism Experience)

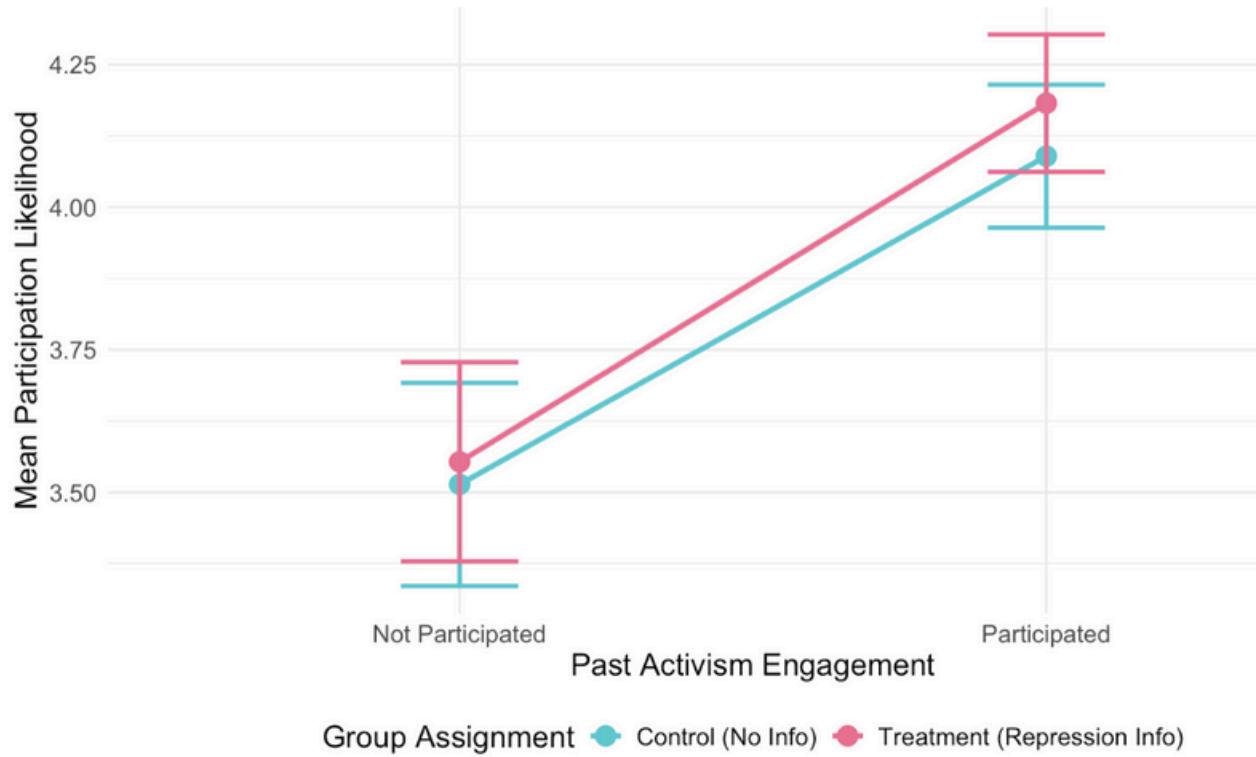
Moreover, interaction effects between repression exposure and activism history were not statistically significant ($p = 0.609$), confirming that exposure to repression-related information did not alter the relationship between prior activism and resource commitment. In other words, activism experience—not informational stimuli—is the primary driver of continued resource investment. This distinction underscores the limitations of one-off informational interventions in cultivating deeper forms of civic engagement. While information can raise awareness, it is prior involvement that builds capacity, confidence, and commitment to action.

Overall, these findings highlight that sustaining activist engagement depends far more on accumulated experience than on exposure to political threats or grievances. Investing in infrastructures that provide youth with meaningful opportunities to participate—through campus organizations, community initiatives, or social movements—is therefore essential. These environments not only mobilize people in the present but also help build the psychological and social foundations that make long-term civic engagement possible.

Experiment 3: Willingness to Engage in SMOs

This experiment aimed to assess whether exposure to information about government repression influences respondents' willingness to engage in civic activities, particularly when accounting for prior activism experience.

The ANOVA results indicate that prior activism is the strongest and most consistent predictor of future civic engagement ($F(1,462) = 64.04, p < 0.001$), showing that individuals who have previously participated in civil society organizations are significantly more likely to express willingness to engage in activism than those who have not. In contrast, exposure to repression-related information had no statistically significant effect on engagement likelihood ($F(1,462) = 1.56, p = 0.212$), nor did the interaction between treatment and activism experience ($F(1,462) = 0.13, p = 0.724$). These results suggest that learning about repression does not substantially alter individuals' willingness to participate, regardless of their prior activism status.



*Table 27 - Effect of Repression Exposure on Participation Likelihood
 (Grouped by Prior Activism Experience)*



Post-hoc Tukey comparisons further confirm that the gap in engagement likelihood between activists and non-activists is large and statistically significant, across both treatment and control conditions. Among those with no prior activism experience, exposure to repression-related information had no effect ($p = 0.985$), indicating that awareness of repression alone is insufficient to mobilize disengaged individuals. Similarly, among those with prior activism experience, no significant difference was observed between the treatment and control groups ($p = 0.783$), reinforcing that their willingness to engage remains stable regardless of messaging. Importantly, activists in both the control (estimate = 0.576, $p < 0.001$) and treatment groups (estimate = 0.629, $p < 0.001$) were significantly more likely to engage compared to non-activists, underscoring the central role of prior involvement in shaping continued commitment.



Overall, these findings reinforce the conclusion that prior activism experience—not exposure to political repression—is the most powerful driver of civic participation. This aligns with theories in the social movement literature suggesting that grievance alone does not automatically translate into action. Instead, participation is more likely when individuals have already been socialized into activist networks, practices, and norms (Klandermans & Oegema 1987; McAdam 1989). Once individuals have engaged in activism, their prior experiences help shape future behavior, providing a psychological and social foundation that sustains engagement over time. Therefore, efforts to increase civic participation may be more effective when they focus on creating entry points for initial involvement, rather than relying solely on informational interventions about state repression.



Developing Effective Digital Communication Strategies for Indonesian Youth Engagement in Civic Space

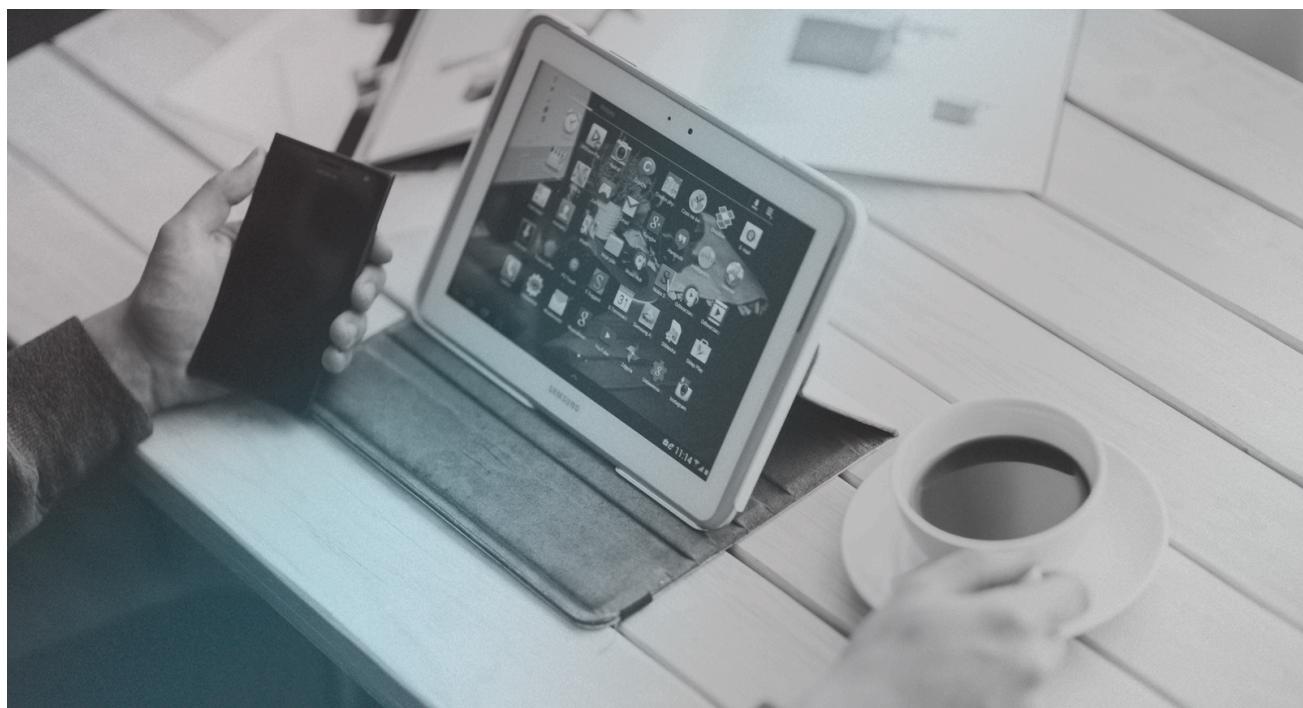


Understanding Youth Digital Behavior

To effectively engage Indonesian youth in civic discourse and advocacy, digital communication strategies must reflect their actual usage patterns and platform preferences. The study shows that over 80% of youth spend at least three hours online daily, with internet usage increasing slightly on weekends due to greater leisure flexibility. Older youth (ages 23–25) report the highest levels of online activity, indicating that digital engagement intensifies with age.

Social media preferences are concentrated around visual and messaging platforms. WhatsApp (91.5%) and Instagram (89.1%) are the most widely used, followed by TikTok (62.2%). In contrast, Facebook and Twitter (X) are the least favored platforms, reflecting a generational shift away from text-heavy or legacy social networks. YouTube receives more mixed reactions—while 29.5% favor it, a significant majority do not.

When it comes to political news, Instagram and website/app-based news sources are the most frequently used, with over 64% accessing them regularly. Traditional media—TV, radio, and print—retain relevance, but digital platforms dominate the information landscape. Interpersonal communication remains essential: 65.5% of respondents frequently discuss political issues with friends, family, and peers, emphasizing the role of community dialogue in shaping civic awareness and action.



Key Strategies for Effective Digital Communication

Platform-Specific Content Creation

To maximize reach and engagement, civic education campaigns should be tailored to the strengths of preferred social media platforms:

- **Instagram:** Utilize visually compelling infographics, interactive stories, and short-form videos to convey key messages about civic engagement and freedom of expression.
- **WhatsApp:** Develop shareable informational materials, such as concise voice notes, explainer graphics, and short video summaries, enabling peer-to-peer information dissemination.
- **TikTok:** Capitalize on youth interest in short-form videos by producing creative, trend-driven content that frames civic discussions in a relatable and engaging manner.
- **YouTube:** Given its mixed reception, use it for in-depth discussions, interviews, and explainer videos that provide a deeper understanding of civic space issues for dedicated audiences.

Timely and Adaptive Content Delivery

Recognizing that social media engagement spikes on weekends, advocacy campaigns should strategically release high-impact content during this period. Weekdays can be used for shorter, more digestible content that fits within the structured schedules of youth, such as quick Instagram reels or WhatsApp updates. Additionally, leveraging real-time trends and viral moments can enhance content visibility and engagement.



Encouraging Safe and Open Discourse

While many young Indonesians express interest in civic engagement, fear of online expression remains a barrier. Strategies should prioritize:

- **Anonymous and Secure Platforms:** Providing options for anonymous participation in civic discussions through encrypted channels or moderated online forums. Through this strategy, participation can avoid surveillance by the third party, encouraging meaningful and engaging participations.
- **Community-Led Discussions:** Encouraging peer-led conversations in private or semi-public spaces, such as WhatsApp groups, to facilitate candid discussions without fear of reprisal. In this way, participants will also feel more equal and dare to share their thoughts with their fellows, facilitating the growth of trust among the participants.
- **Digital Literacy and Security Awareness:** Equipping youth with knowledge on online safety, misinformation detection, and responsible digital activism to foster confident civic participation. Youths must also be aware of the danger of the Electronic Information and Transaction Law, the information disseminated by buzzers and the possible surveillance by the state and technology companies to personal devices.

Leveraging Influencers and Community Figures

With 65.5% of youth frequently discussing news within their social circles, collaborating with trusted influencers, content creators, and local community figures can amplify civic messages. Influencer partnerships on Instagram and TikTok, particularly with those already engaged in social advocacy, can lend credibility and increase reach among youth audiences.

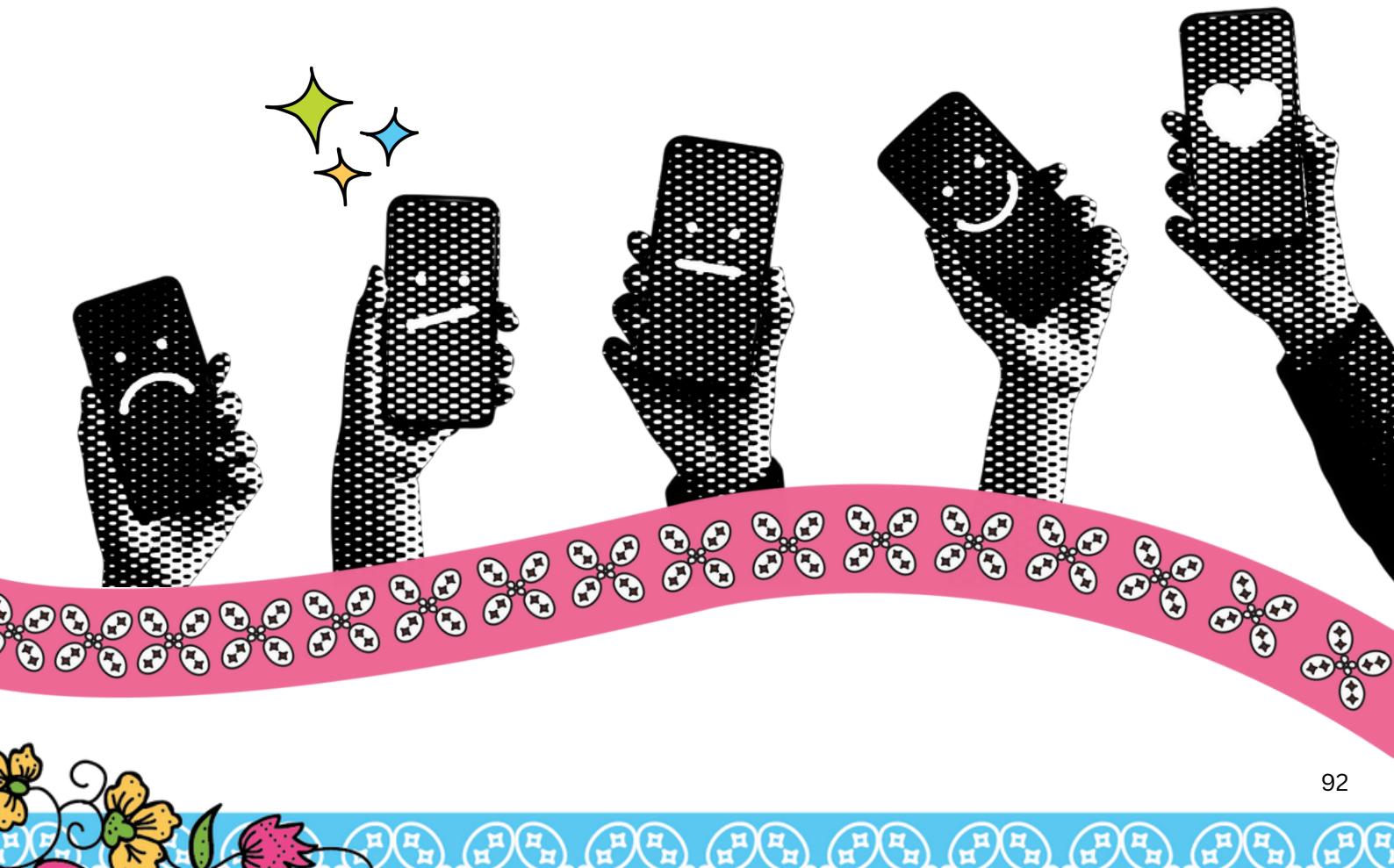


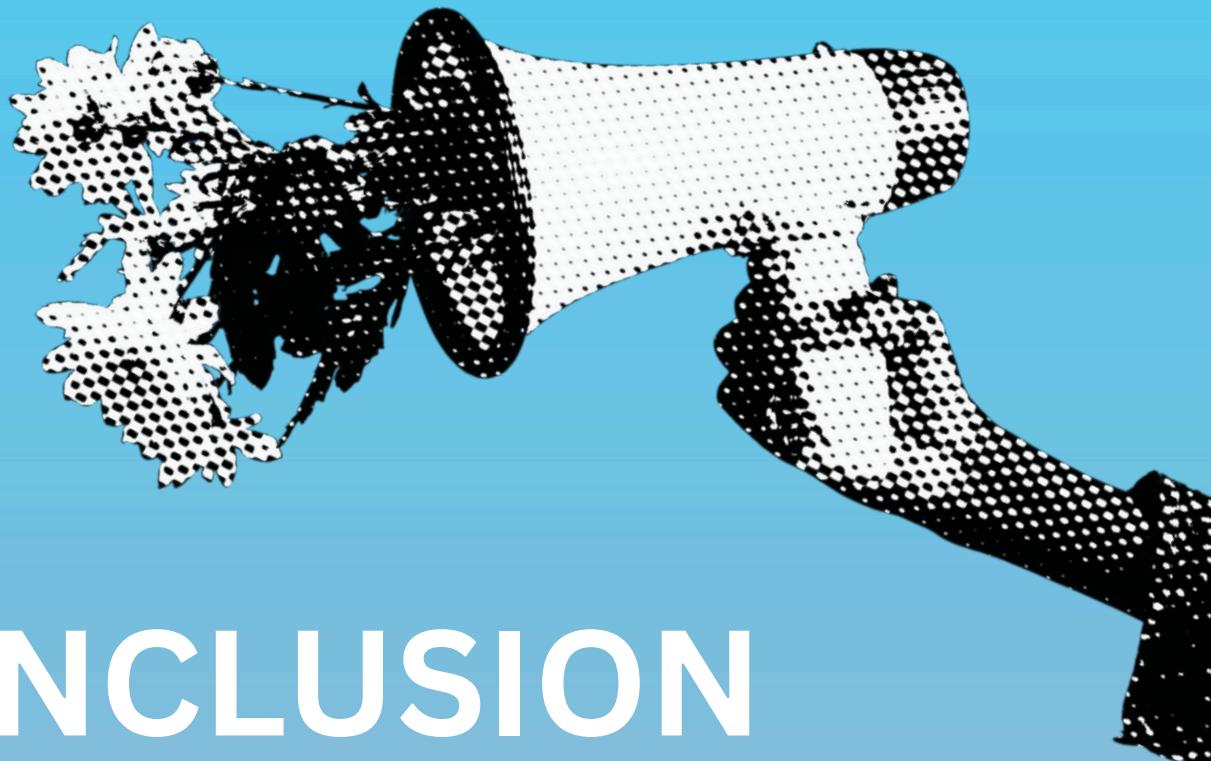
Interactive and Gamified Engagement

To sustain interest in civic topics, engagement strategies should incorporate interactive elements:

- **Polls and Quizzes:** Using Instagram stories or WhatsApp polls to test knowledge on civic rights and governance.
- **Challenges and Campaigns:** Encouraging youth participation in digital advocacy campaigns, such as hashtag movements or video challenges that highlight civic issues.
- **Simulated Civic Experiences:** Developing interactive digital simulations or role-playing games that allow users to navigate civic scenarios, encouraging active learning and engagement.

Developing effective digital communication strategies for Indonesian youth requires a nuanced approach that aligns with their online behaviors, social media preferences, and engagement patterns. By leveraging platform-specific content, strategic timing, safe discussion spaces, influencer collaborations, and interactive engagement methods, SMOs and policymakers can cultivate a more vibrant, inclusive, and participatory digital civic space. Ensuring that young voices are heard and impactful in shaping the future requires not just information dissemination but fostering an ecosystem where youth feel empowered, informed, and safe to express their views.





CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Indonesia is experiencing democratic backsliding, as reflected in the shrinking civic space and increasing constraints on civil society. Our findings illustrate that Indonesian youth, particularly those engaged in social movements, are highly aware of these challenges and recognize the risks associated with expressing their opinions and organizing collective actions.

Regional disparities also play a significant role in shaping perceptions, with Western Indonesia showing the highest concerns about government repression and restricted civic space, while Eastern Indonesia demonstrates a more optimistic outlook. Although fear of harassment and government intimidation remains a significant obstacle, young activists continue to seek avenues for political engagement and advocacy, emphasizing the need for safe and inclusive civic spaces.

The qualitative findings highlight the diverse ways in which youth activists interpret and respond to the shrinking civic space. While some activists perceive a direct threat to their work, others do not feel significantly constrained, reflecting the uneven impact of democratic backsliding across different sectors and organizations. The study also reveals differing views on government responsiveness—while some activists believe that the government remains accessible despite bureaucratic challenges, others feel that their demands are consistently ignored.

In response to these conditions, activists adopt various strategies to sustain their movements, ranging from expanding social networks and strengthening alliances to engaging in mass mobilization as a means of influencing policy decisions. This demonstrates that despite the pressures they face, youth activists remain resilient and adaptive in their efforts to safeguard civic space.

Given the central role of digital platforms in youth political engagement, this study underscores the importance of developing effective digital communication strategies that align with youth media consumption habits. With Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok emerging as the primary platforms for news and activism, advocacy efforts must prioritize visual and interactive content to effectively reach and mobilize young audiences.

Additionally, ensuring greater protection from online harassment and government intimidation is crucial to fostering a more open and participatory civic environment. Moving forward, policymakers, SMOs, and digital platforms must work collaboratively to address these challenges, ensuring that young Indonesians have the necessary resources and protections to sustain their participation in civic and political life.



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