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School: A sacred mansion of political education for future generations

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I recently had a nostalgic visit to my primary school. The teachers gave me an opportunity to have a wonderful conversation with the students there. When I asked them about their dreams, most of them answered that they wanted to become doctors,

police officers and artists.

Surprisingly, president or politician were not on their wish list. When I asked why, a

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Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report in June 2012 in which more than 50 percent of the respondents thought that political parties had performed badly or very badly (The Jakarta Post Outlook, 2014).

Given these facts, hopes that our young generation will eventually alter the status quo in politics is a blurry possibility. A lack of political education is one of the reasons why political participation and awareness among society has come into such a dejected state.

Although research in 2001, which was conducted on 1,000 Indonesian university students by Hamad et.al., did not reveal a strong correlation between media consumption and political participation, the media influence nowadays appears to be very powerful as a means of political campaign. The case of Joko 'æJokowi' Widodo's rise to presidency shows that the media can shape public opinion.

Furthermore, the media is central in providing political education to people, especially the younger generation, because they spend a lot of time reading or watching the news from the media usually via the Internet.

Sadly, free access to the media opens up the Pandora's box of potentially misleading information. The problem is that because media ownership falls in the hands of just a few select people, some political party leaders own, and hence control, TV stations or print media to make sure that their interests receive adequate coverage at the expense of the interests of wider society.

Notwithstanding the fact that people can access lots of programs in a faster and more accessible media, political coverage and content can be politically tendentious. The usual target is low-information voters who will use their voice for the first time but do not really know anything about politics.

Misleading information can potentially mislead first-time voters to take all information for granted. In addition, news depicting massive political corruption can deprive the younger generation of their appetite toward politics. The increasing trend of poll boycotts since the 2004 elections attests to the skepticism and apathy in our society. The phenomenon is predicted to continue in the next election if the voters' distrust in political parties persists.

Therefore, improving political education and participation in society should top the agenda of all stake-holders. An early political education is essential to putting an end to skepticism.

Remember that media is not the only tool of political education. Family, peer groups and formal educational institutions are other choices.

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There is, however, a big gap between the ideal and the reality. Students will only sit in a classroom and listen to their teachers explaining nationalism, heroism and state ideology during civic class. The indicator of success in this lesson is determined by their test score.

Ideally, students should be encouraged to participate in and communicate the practical concepts of civic education. Schools and teachers play a pivotal role in educating politics to students through the following steps.

First, schools must instill critical thinking among students. Choosing the right teaching strategy that promotes democratic participation is essential. It could take shape in debate or group discussion about political affairs, such as citizens'™ rights and responsibilities.

Students need critical thinking to absorb and synthesize the current affairs and policies of their surroundings.

Second, teachers should be able to correlate their materials with the latest political issues to build students'™ political literacy. This is not the duty of civic teachers only, but also teachers of other subjects. In the United States, for example, teachers will engage students in discussing domestic political issues from a young age. Of course, the content should consider the complexity and appropriateness for student age-groups.

Current political issues could be integrated into reading or writing classes. When students learn to write hortatory text, they could discuss the good and bad aspects of being poll absentees. Or when they read report texts, they could find job descriptions of a mayor and his or her authorities.

Third, students must be adequately exposed to a politically rich environment. Watching the daily job and working environment of local politicians could be a great program. Schools could initiate visits to political institutions such as the House of Representatives.

Schools could also invite guest speakers from the House to speak about his or her job and how policies are made. Students could learn politics from its actors.

Last but not least, schools could motivate students to keep faith in democracy by holding democratic elections for leaders of class and student organizations.

Extracurricular activities such as debate and scouting constitute other mediums through which students could learn the values of democracy.

In the end, politics is like a weapon. It can protect us if it is in the hand of good people, but kill us if it is under the control of evil.

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progress.

The writer is The Ohio State University graduate majoring in Second and Foreign Language Education.

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