



Strengthening Political Literacy through Civic Learning: A Study of Democratic Education among University Students

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Abstract

Political literacy is an important component of civic competence because university students need to understand democratic institutions, political processes, public issues, and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Civic learning can provide opportunities for students to develop political knowledge, analytical skills, political awareness, and meaningful participation in democratic life. This article aims to examine how civic learning can strengthen political literacy among university students through democratic education. This study used a literature review to examine recent studies on civic education, political literacy, democratic participation, political awareness, and participatory learning in higher education. The findings indicate that discussion-based learning, case analysis, project-based learning, deliberative activities, political issue analysis, and student participation can strengthen students' understanding of democratic processes and develop critical and reflective civic dispositions. Therefore, democratic education in higher education should move beyond theoretical knowledge and provide students with opportunities to analyze political issues, evaluate information, engage in dialogue, and practice responsible participation in democratic life.

Keywords: political literacy, civic learning, democratic education, university students, political awareness, civic participation

1. Introduction

Political literacy is an important element of civic competence because it enables individuals to understand political institutions, democratic processes, public policies, political rights, and their responsibilities as citizens. For university students, political literacy is particularly relevant because they are approaching greater participation in social and political life and increasingly encounter political information through both formal education and digital environments (Schulz et al., 2024).

University students encounter political information through lectures, news media, social media, student organizations, public discussions, and community activities. These different sources can provide valuable knowledge, but they can also expose students to incomplete

information, competing interpretations, and politically biased content. Civic learning therefore needs to help students develop the ability to examine information critically and form political judgments based on evidence rather than simply accepting available claims (Cholifah et al., 2026).

Democratic education provides an important foundation for developing political literacy because it introduces students to democratic principles, institutions, rights, responsibilities, participation, and deliberation. Recent research in Indonesian higher education shows that Civic Education courses can strengthen students' civic literacy through project-based learning, case studies, and interactive learning activities that connect classroom concepts with contemporary social issues (Sukmayadi et al., 2025).

Political literacy is not limited to knowing political terms or institutions. Students also need to understand how democratic institutions operate and how citizens can participate meaningfully in political processes. Research on political literacy among Indonesian university students found that political education can strengthen understanding of democratic institutions, constitutional principles, political analysis, and information verification in digital environments (Jebarus & Sunarso, 2026).

Developing political literacy also requires learning environments where students can discuss political issues openly and respectfully. Open classroom climates can encourage students to express opinions, consider alternative viewpoints, and develop political knowledge and interest. Research on civic education indicates that cognitive activation and open discussion environments are associated with students' willingness to participate in political and civic life (Alscher et al., 2022).

Participatory learning can further strengthen democratic education by allowing students to experience democratic practices directly. Activities such as student elections, deliberative discussions, political simulations, organizational participation, and public issue projects can provide opportunities for students to practice decision-making and communication within democratic settings (Kiess, 2024).

Political tolerance is another important dimension of democratic education. Students need to understand that democracy involves the coexistence of different viewpoints and that disagreement does not necessarily threaten democratic relationships. Recent research at an Indonesian university found that a digital-based democratic education model improved students' political tolerance, respectful communication, empathy, and evidence-based reasoning (Japar et al., 2025).

Political participation among university students can also be strengthened when civic learning connects theoretical knowledge with practical experiences. Research on Indonesian students' participation in the 2024 legislative election indicates that civic awareness and educational experiences were relevant to students' understanding and practice of political participation (Nugraha et al., 2026).

Project-based civic learning provides another approach to developing political literacy. Students can investigate public issues, examine government policies, collect information from multiple sources, and formulate recommendations. Such activities encourage students to use political knowledge in authentic situations and develop competencies that cannot be fully acquired through lectures alone (Dahliyana et al., 2026).

Political morality is also relevant to democratic education. Political literacy should not only produce students who understand political systems but also students who recognize the importance of integrity, responsibility, tolerance, and respect for democratic values. Recent

research on culturally based democracy teaching materials demonstrates the potential of contextual learning to strengthen political morality among university students (Situru et al., 2026).

Based on these considerations, this article aims to examine how civic learning can strengthen political literacy among university students through democratic education. The discussion focuses on political knowledge, critical analysis, political tolerance, information literacy, participatory learning, democratic dialogue, and students' political engagement.

2. Research Method

This article employs a literature review method to examine recent research concerning political literacy, civic learning, democratic education, political participation, and university students. The review aims to identify how educational experiences can contribute to students' understanding of political institutions and democratic practices (Kothan et al., 2025).

The literature was selected based on its relevance to political literacy and democratic learning in higher education. Particular attention was given to studies addressing Civic Education courses, political awareness, participatory learning, digital citizenship, political tolerance, project-based learning, and students' participation in democratic activities (Sukmayadi et al., 2025).

The selected literature was analyzed thematically by identifying findings related to political knowledge, critical political analysis, democratic dialogue, political tolerance, participation, information verification, and civic competence. The findings were then synthesized to develop an integrated understanding of how civic learning can strengthen political literacy among university students (Retnasari et al., 2026).

3. Results And Discussion

Political literacy among university students involves the ability to understand political institutions, democratic principles, public issues, and mechanisms of political participation. Students with stronger civic knowledge are generally better positioned to understand political events and make informed decisions about political participation. Recent international evidence indicates that civic knowledge is positively associated with expectations of electoral participation and other forms of civic engagement (Schulz et al., 2024).

Civic learning can strengthen political literacy when learning activities move beyond memorizing concepts and require students to interpret political issues. Students can analyze election systems, public policies, constitutional principles, government institutions, and contemporary social problems. Such activities help students connect theoretical knowledge with political realities and develop a deeper understanding of democratic processes (Jebarus & Sunarso, 2026).

Discussion-based learning is particularly useful because political literacy requires students to consider different perspectives. In a classroom that encourages respectful dialogue, students can express their views, respond to alternative arguments, and reconsider assumptions. Research on civic education suggests that an open classroom climate and cognitive activation can strengthen political interest and willingness to participate in civic life (Alscher et al., 2022).

Case-based learning can make political concepts more meaningful by connecting them with real social situations. Students can examine cases concerning elections, public policy, human rights, political communication, or community problems and then identify the relevant

democratic principles. This approach helps students understand how political concepts operate in real situations rather than treating them as abstract knowledge (Sukmayadi et al., 2025).

Project-based civic learning can further strengthen students' political literacy by requiring them to investigate public issues over a longer period. Students may gather information, compare sources, identify stakeholders, analyze policy alternatives, and develop recommendations. Such activities encourage independent inquiry and help students apply political knowledge to real-world problems (Dahliyana et al., 2026).

Digital environments have become important spaces for political learning because university students increasingly encounter political information through social media and online platforms. Civic learning therefore needs to include skills for verifying information, identifying unreliable claims, and distinguishing evidence-based arguments from unsupported opinions. Recent research on civic learning among Indonesian university students emphasizes the growing importance of digital literacy in political participation (Cholifah et al., 2026).

Information verification is particularly important because political literacy depends on the quality of information students use to form their judgments. Students need to examine sources, compare information, identify misleading claims, and consider the reliability of evidence. These competencies enable students to become more independent political learners and reduce their dependence on unverified political information (Jebarus & Sunarso, 2026).

Political tolerance is another important outcome of democratic education. Students need to understand that political disagreement is a normal part of democratic life and that different viewpoints can coexist within the same political system. A recent digital democratic education model developed at an Indonesian university demonstrated improvements in political tolerance, respectful communication, empathy, and evidence-based reasoning among students (Japar et al., 2025).

Deliberative dialogue can strengthen this process because students are required to listen, provide reasons, respond to counterarguments, and search for reasonable conclusions. Such activities provide students with opportunities to experience democratic practices rather than simply learning about democracy as a theoretical concept. Research on political engagement during education also indicates that direct experiences of democratic participation are related to political trust and democratic dispositions (Kiess, 2024).

Student organizations and campus activities can also contribute to political literacy. Participation in organizations gives students opportunities to practice leadership, decision-making, negotiation, communication, and collective action. Recent research on political education among university students found that participation in deliberative forums and student organizations can enrich political experience and contribute to civic literacy (Kothen et al., 2025).

processes can help students understand democratic institutions more concretely. Research on Indonesian university students during the 2024 legislative elections found that their political participation was connected with civic awareness and educational experiences (Nugraha et al., 2026).

Political literacy should also include an understanding of constitutional principles and democratic institutions. Students need to know how government institutions function, how political authority is organized, how citizens' rights are protected, and how citizens can participate in decision-making. Civic Education courses can provide a structured environment for developing this foundational political knowledge (Sukmayadi et al., 2025).

Critical thinking is essential because political information often involves competing interpretations and claims. Students should be encouraged to examine evidence, compare arguments, identify assumptions, and distinguish facts from opinions. Research on higher education civic learning indicates that pedagogical approaches that emphasize analysis and dialogue can support students' analytical and reflective civic dispositions (Kothén et al., 2025).

Democratic education can also function as an equalizing mechanism when students come from different social and political backgrounds. Students may enter university with unequal levels of political experience, confidence, and knowledge. Research on citizenship education shows that educational experiences can help compensate for differences in political socialization and strengthen students' internal political efficacy (Matthieu & Junius, 2024).

However, civic learning does not automatically produce political participation. The quality of teaching, classroom climate, opportunities for participation, and students' own political interest can influence outcomes. Evidence from civic education research indicates that cognitive activation and open discussion are particularly important for connecting classroom experiences with students' willingness to participate (Alscher et al., 2022).

Another challenge is the possibility that political education becomes overly theoretical. Students may learn concepts such as democracy, elections, political institutions, and citizenship without understanding how these concepts operate in real political situations. Contextual and project-based learning can address this limitation by connecting academic knowledge with actual public issues and participatory experiences (Sukmayadi et al., 2025).

Teacher and lecturer readiness is also important. Educators need to facilitate political discussions without imposing personal political preferences on students. They must create learning environments that allow disagreement while maintaining evidence-based reasoning, respect, and academic responsibility. Research on participatory civic skills in Indonesian higher education highlights the importance of pedagogical innovation as well as institutional conditions that support civic learning (Retnasari et al., 2026).

Assessment should also measure political literacy more broadly than factual knowledge. Students can be assessed through case analysis, political issue essays, structured debates, policy projects, reflection activities, or community-based investigations. Such assessments can provide evidence of students' ability to apply political knowledge, evaluate arguments, and construct reasoned positions.

The campus environment itself can function as a democratic learning space. Student organizations, deliberative forums, elections, public discussions, and community projects provide opportunities for students to experience participation and responsibility directly. These experiences can complement classroom instruction and help students develop practical democratic competencies (Kiess, 2024).

Political literacy can also be strengthened through contextual learning based on students' social and cultural environments. Teaching materials that connect democratic principles with local community experiences can make political concepts more meaningful and help students understand how democratic values are expressed in different social contexts (Situru et al., 2026).

Overall, the literature indicates that strengthening political literacy requires a combination of political knowledge, critical analysis, information literacy, democratic dialogue, political tolerance, and practical participation. Civic learning becomes more effective when students are given opportunities not only to learn about democracy but also to practice democratic principles

through discussion, projects, organizations, and other participatory experiences (Japar et al., 2025).

4. Conclusion

Civic learning can play an important role in strengthening political literacy among university students. Political literacy involves more than understanding political terminology; it includes knowledge of democratic institutions, the ability to evaluate political information, awareness of political rights and responsibilities, tolerance toward differences, and the capacity to participate responsibly.

Democratic education becomes more meaningful when students are actively involved in discussion, case analysis, project-based learning, deliberation, student organizations, and other participatory activities. These experiences allow students to connect theoretical knowledge with real political and social situations.

Digital environments also need to become part of political literacy education because students increasingly obtain and discuss political information through online platforms. Students therefore need strong information-verification skills and the ability to evaluate political claims critically before accepting or sharing them.

Ultimately, strengthening political literacy requires an educational environment that combines political knowledge, critical thinking, democratic dialogue, digital literacy, and practical participation. Universities can become important spaces for developing students who are not only knowledgeable about democracy but also capable of practicing democratic values responsibly in society.

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