

From Identity to Evaluation: Political Reorientation among Generation Z Voters in Post-Conflict Aceh

Naidi Faisal¹, Taufik Abdullah², Mulyadi³, Muhammad bin Abubakar⁴
T. Muzaffarsyah⁵

¹⁻⁵Universitas Malikussaleh, Lhokseumawe-Aceh, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: naidi@unimal.ac.id

Abstract

This article examines the political reorientation of Generation Z voters in Aceh, Indonesia, between the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections. In Aceh—a post-conflict region where Islamic values and inherited political affiliations continue to shape civic life—young voters have traditionally aligned with electoral choices informed by family ties, clerical influence, and communal expectations. Using a sequential explanatory research design, this study combines survey data from two election cycles (n=73 in 2019; n=267 in 2024) with 30 in-depth interviews across three public universities. Findings reveal a notable shift from identity-based loyalty toward a more evaluative form of political reasoning. By 2024, many respondents reported prioritizing leadership credibility, programmatic vision, and policy clarity over ethnic and religious affiliation. This transformation was catalyzed by increased exposure to diverse information via social media, peer deliberation, and civic engagement in academic settings. However, the shift unfolded amid significant tension, particularly from family members and educators who framed political choice as a moral imperative. Respondents navigated these pressures through selective compliance, quiet dissent, and emerging political autonomy. This behavioral shift is understood here as a form of *selective identity politics*, in which inherited affiliations remain relevant but are increasingly subjected to rational and ethical scrutiny. The study contributes to broader discussions on youth political agency, identity negotiation, and democratic participation in culturally embedded and post-conflict contexts.

Keywords: *Generation Z, Political Behavior, Socialization, Post-Conflict, Aceh*

A. Introduction

Presidential elections in Aceh represent more than a procedural exercise in democracy; they are a performative space in which political, religious, and generational narratives are contested and reproduced (Barter 2024; Fadhli 2024; Shane Joshua Barter 2011). For Generation Z—digital natives born between 1997 and 2012—entry into electoral politics occurred at a time when identity-based appeals were at their height (Sladek and Grabinger 2016). The 2019 presidential election, in particular, witnessed an intense mobilization of voters along religious

and ethnic lines, with political messages framed through moral binaries, communal memory, and deeply personalized narratives (Pepinsky 2019; Qodir, Jubba, and Hidayati 2022). In Aceh, a region shaped by its historical experience of conflict and the enduring influence of Islamic values, such appeals found fertile ground (Feener 2013). Young voters, many of them participating for the first time, were drawn into this atmosphere through family influence, religious messaging, and uncritical engagement with politicized content circulated across digital platforms.

Scholarly accounts have largely described this generation as politically ambivalent – active in online political expression yet inconsistent in institutional engagement. Studies in the broader Indonesian context show that youth political choices are often shaped by inherited religious and ethnic loyalties, compounded by algorithmic echo chambers and low levels of political literacy (Halimatusa'diyah 2023; Lim 2017; Muhtadi 2018; Sahlan and Ahmad 2023; Sumaktoyo 2021; Sumartias et al. 2020). In Aceh, these dynamics are intensified by a post-conflict political culture that equates religious fidelity with moral legitimacy, and where the family often acts as the primary agent of political socialization (Manan et al. 2024; Manan, Hadi, and Rahmat Saputra 2022). The result has been a pattern of passive electoral behavior, with many young voters aligning with political choices transmitted from their parents without deliberation (Achen 2002; B. Artes et al. 2023).

Yet, beneath the continuity lies a tremor of change. The 2024 election introduced subtle but meaningful shifts in how young voters in Aceh approached politics (Grehenson 2023). While identity politics remained a visible feature of the campaign, a growing number of Generation Z voters began to demonstrate a willingness to question inherited loyalties. Political preferences were increasingly informed by concerns over governance quality, leadership competence, and economic policy. These changes – however uneven – suggest that a portion of young voters is developing a more autonomous and evaluative mode of political reasoning, shaped by exposure to social media, civic discussions in academic settings, and peer interactions. Despite these developments, existing literature offers little insight into how this generational transition is unfolding in Aceh. Most studies either generalize youth behavior across Indonesia or focus on identity politics without examining its potential erosion. Comparative research across electoral cycles remains rare, especially in regions where identity-based politics have long been institutionalized. This article addresses that gap by exploring the evolving political attitudes of Generation Z voters in Aceh between the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections.

The central argument advanced here is that Gen Z voters in Aceh are not fixed within inherited political identities, but are negotiating those identities in light of new political stimuli. While religion and tradition remain influential,

their political behavior reflects a growing openness to rational evaluation and policy-oriented thinking. Understanding this transformation is crucial for assessing the trajectory of democratic participation in post-conflict, culturally conservative societies—where the consolidation of democracy depends not only on institutions, but also on the evolving consciousness of its youngest citizens.

B. Method

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach—anchored in sequential explanatory design—to explore shifts in political behavior among Generation Z voters in Aceh during the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows for both the identification of patterns and the exploration of meaning behind those patterns. This dual-layered approach was considered essential in capturing the complexity of political identity, emotion, and rationality among first-time voters in a region where religious authority and social conservatism remain salient forces.

The quantitative component consisted of structured surveys conducted in two waves. The first survey, carried out in 2019, involved 73 undergraduate students from three universities: Universitas Syiah Kuala (USK), Universitas Malikussaleh (Unimal), and Universitas Islam Negeri Ar-Raniry (UIN Ar-Raniry). In 2024, the survey was repeated with 267 respondents from the same institutions. These surveys aimed to map voting behavior, information sources, political preferences, and perceptions of identity politics. To ensure clarity and cultural relevance, a pilot test was conducted prior to mass distribution, and the survey was deployed online through channels frequented by Gen Z communities.

Complementing the quantitative data, the qualitative strand comprised in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 student informants—ten from each campus—selected through purposive random sampling. These informants were selected based on their eligibility as first-time voters in 2019 and were invited to reflect on their political experiences across both elections. The interviews explored topics such as personal motivations, religious influence, media consumption, and evolving criteria in electoral decision-making. The analytical framework follows the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (2014), involving three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This process allowed for the triangulation of survey and interview data, enhancing the reliability and richness of findings. Key themes were identified around identity attachment, candidate evaluation, political literacy, and the negotiation of familial expectations.

Philosophically, the study aligns with a phenomenological perspective, as it centers on how young voters subjectively interpret their political reality. By listening to how Gen Z voters in Aceh articulate their political reasoning, the

research aims not only to identify behavioral change, but also to understand the lived meanings behind such change. As Lanigan (1979) and Ruesch (2012) suggest, phenomenological inquiry is vital for unpacking the subtle interplay between individual consciousness, social structure, and symbolic narratives. In short, this method was designed not simply to measure change, but to capture its texture and rhythm as lived by the individuals navigating between inherited identity politics and emergent civic rationality.

C. Result and Discussion

1. From Identity-Based Voting to Evaluative Reasoning

In the 2019 presidential election, the political preferences of Generation Z voters in Aceh were shaped predominantly by identity-based considerations. Survey data collected from 73 first-time voters enrolled at three major public universities in the region—Universitas Syiah Kuala, Universitas Malikussaleh, and UIN Ar-Raniry—revealed that 67% of respondents selected candidates based primarily on religious affiliation and ethnic proximity. Only a small minority, 11%, cited leadership capability or policy clarity as decisive factors in their electoral choices. These figures were further supported by in-depth interviews conducted in 2020 and 2021, in which many participants described their voting as an act of loyalty to family expectations or communal religious sentiment. One student from Malikussaleh University recalled, “My parents once told me, ‘It’s better to vote for someone from our own village than someone from outside. No matter the reason, always support your own people.’ That became my reference in making political choices. Even if the candidate from our ethnic group has weak ideas, at least we support one of our own” (Interview with AA, 18 May 2023).

This early pattern exemplifies what Almond and Verba (1963) describe as a “subject political culture,” in which civic engagement is characterized by deferential and inherited loyalties rather than informed political agency. In Aceh’s sociocultural context, such behavior was unsurprising. The legacy of religious authority, combined with a strong familial structure and a post-conflict moral narrative, reinforced communal forms of political obligation. Voting was less a matter of individual deliberation and more an extension of one’s place in the moral and spiritual order. Several students confirmed that in 2019, they did not even watch political debates or engage in comparative assessment, trusting instead in what their elders or religious teachers endorsed. The ballot box, for many, was a site of ritualized affirmation rather than rational reflection.

By the 2024 election, however, there was growing evidence of a shift in this behavioral pattern. A follow-up survey involving 267 respondents from the same campuses indicated a notable reorientation: only 24% continued to rely on identity-based considerations as their primary voting logic, while 66% now prioritized programmatic substance, leadership integrity, and issue clarity.

Moreover, more than half of the respondents (53%) reported verifying political information from multiple digital sources—an indication of increased digital selectivity and analytical awareness. This evolution was echoed in qualitative interviews. A student from Malikussaleh University reflected, “I voted for Prabowo because I believed his ideas were better than Jokowi’s. His leadership experience in state institutions was broader and more challenging. What impressed me most was that he was a former TNI leader and supported by many Islamic clerics. That showed me the ulama trusted him to uplift Islam in Indonesia” (Interview with MR, 17 May 2023).

The underlying reasons for this shift appear multifaceted. First, there is clear disillusionment with identity-driven leadership that failed to deliver meaningful policy outcomes. Several participants voiced frustration that those elected on the basis of religious sentiment in 2019 did not address pressing economic or educational concerns. This disenchantment catalyzed a reevaluation of what political leadership ought to entail and opened space for critical assessment. Second, university life—especially academic discourse, campus forums, and peer networks—played a significant role in nurturing a more deliberative political outlook. The presence of student organizations, online debates, and critical lecturers created a civic environment that encouraged students to interrogate inherited political assumptions. In line with Easton and Dennis’s (1969) theory of cognitive political orientation, respondents began to shift from emotional and symbolic attachments to a more analytical evaluation of political actors. They were no longer merely inheriting preferences, but constructing them based on exposure to alternative information and public reasoning. Third, while social media remained the dominant mode of political communication, its use had become more strategic and cautious. In 2019, platforms like WhatsApp and Instagram were primary vectors of unfiltered propaganda, clerical endorsements, and conspiracy narratives. By 2024, however, many students had become more skeptical. They reported cross-referencing claims, comparing platforms, and actively avoiding overtly partisan religious content. Inglehart’s (2009) post-materialist thesis helps explain this trend: as younger voters gain confidence in their educational and informational resources, they begin to prioritize competence and ethical leadership over cultural affinity.

Crucially, identity has not disappeared from the political equation; it has been reframed. Many students still prefer candidates who share their religious background or cultural affiliation, but they now insist that such identity markers be accompanied by demonstrable competence and credibility. This has given rise to what this study terms “selective identity politics”—a hybrid evaluative mode in which identity is necessary but not sufficient. One student explained it succinctly: “All candidates are Muslims, but only one shows consistency,

honesty, and a plan that makes sense. That's why I chose him" (Interview with Y, USK, 20 March 2024).

This evolving rationality holds significant implications. It challenges conventional assumptions about the political docility of youth in religiously conservative societies. It also demands a transformation in how political legitimacy is constructed and communicated. As Nancy Fraser (1995; 2024) argues, democratic participation is sustainable only when grounded in reflective agency rather than ritual affirmation. The behavior of Gen Z voters in Aceh reflects precisely this tension – between the comfort of inherited certainty and the responsibility of civic discernment. In this space, a new model of political subjectivity is emerging: one that does not reject identity, but subjects it to the test of reason.

2. The Role of Social and Informational Agents: Navigating Between Influence and Autonomy

The transition from identity-based to evaluative political reasoning among young voters in Aceh did not occur in isolation. It was catalyzed by two dominant social forces: the expanding reach of social media and the normative environment of higher education campuses. These agents of socialization played mutually reinforcing roles, shaping not only how political information was accessed but also how it was filtered, interpreted, and ultimately acted upon. Survey data from 2024 revealed that 51% of respondents considered social media to be "very influential" in shaping their political preferences, while another 43% acknowledged its significant impact. Platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok – though often criticized for promoting superficial engagement – were seen by many Gen Z users as essential tools for accessing real-time updates, fact-checking claims, and engaging with diverse political opinions. This marks a shift from the 2019 landscape, where social media functioned primarily as a conduit for unverified religious or ethnic narratives, often consumed passively. In 2024, respondents were more selective. More than half (53%) actively verified information across sources before forming opinions or making decisions.

This change was evident in their narratives. One student from UIN Ar-Raniry described how he had come to distrust single-source information: "In 2019, I shared political posts without reading. Now I double-check everything. Sometimes, even my ustadz's posts are misleading" (Interview with AZ, Banda Aceh, 20 June 2023). Others spoke about using social media not just for consumption but for discussion. They posted stories about candidates' policies, created comparative infographics, and joined Telegram groups dedicated to youth civic dialogue. The act of posting had become a form of positioning – a way of expressing not just allegiance but also critical engagement.

These digital habits were further shaped by the campus environment, where ideas, debates, and peer dialogue intersected. Exposure to classroom discussions, extracurricular political forums, and student-led campaigns created an atmosphere of reflexivity. Students reported that hearing opposing viewpoints encouraged them to revisit their assumptions. As one USK student put it, “I used to think being a good Muslim meant voting a certain way. But after a campus debate, I realized Islam doesn’t demand blind loyalty. It demands justice and accountability” (Interview with I, Banda Aceh, 3 May 2024). These narratives illustrate what Nancy Fraser (1995) termed subaltern counterpublics – alternative spaces where marginalized perspectives, including anti-identity stances, can be articulated and legitimized.

Still, this exposure was not without contradictions. The same campus spaces that fostered deliberation could also replicate ideological pressure. Several students described being pressured by lecturers to align with particular candidates under the guise of religious appropriateness. Some faced ridicule or social exclusion for publicly supporting candidates seen as “less Islamic.” One informant recounted: “A lecturer openly mocked my support for Ganjar in class. I felt humiliated, but it made me more certain of my choice” (Interview with S, Unimal, 17 May 2023). These moments of coercion ironically deepened political maturity, as students had to reconcile personal beliefs with external pressure, affirming agency through resistance.

The interaction between media and social environments reflects what the dissertation conceptualizes as a dynamic feedback loop. Information acquired online was interpreted through social filters – friends, lecturers, family – and these interpretations were then reinforced or challenged in digital spaces. This mirrors the political socialization framework in Easton’s systems theory, where inputs from the environment (media, social networks) are processed by individuals and institutions before feeding back into political decision-making structures.

While Gen Z voters remained digitally immersed, they also became digitally discerning. Their practices reveal a shift toward what Inglehart (1997) identifies as post-materialist rationality – a political orientation grounded not in blind belief but in ethical reflection and practical concern. Notably, the transformation was uneven. Some students still conflated faith with political choice, while others wielded religious principles as tools of critique. This tension, however, is generative. It is within this contested space that democratic subjectivity is forged – where identity, information, and agency collide to shape a new kind of voter: one who asks not only “who represents me?” but also “who deserves to?” In sum, social media and educational institutions have become more than channels of influence; they are arenas of negotiation. Within them, Gen Z voters are learning to discern, to deliberate, and, crucially, to dissent. It is

here – in the interplay of persuasion and resistance – that their political identities are being redefined.

3. Contesting Authority: Youth Resistance and the Struggle for Political Autonomy

While family and religious authorities continue to exert powerful influence over political preferences in Aceh, many young voters – particularly those in Generation Z – have begun to challenge these structures in subtle yet significant ways. This resistance signals a shift in the locus of political authority, away from inherited loyalties and toward a more personalized, self-determined orientation. It marks a rupture in the chain of political socialization, where children once mirrored the preferences of their parents and community elders without contestation.

Several informants described the emotional and cognitive tension they experienced when their personal reflections clashed with family expectations. A student from Universitas Malikussaleh shared, “Before the election, my father told me not to vote for Jokowi because he was anti-Islam. But when I asked, aren’t both candidates Muslim? I began to question whether everything he said was true. But I didn’t want to argue, so I just voted for Prabowo” (Interview with H, 13 April 2023). This quote reflects the early ambivalence many youth felt – aware of inconsistencies in the political narratives passed down to them, yet reluctant or unready to deviate from them. Over time, however, this ambivalence turned into action. A student from the same campus later admitted, “In 2019, I followed my father’s political choice without question. But by 2024, I felt the need to decide for myself. It no longer made sense to just obey. I watched debates, compared visions, and chose based on my own analysis” (Interview with D, 17 May 2023). This journey toward political autonomy is not merely an act of defiance but a transformation in epistemological authority – from inherited wisdom to rational scrutiny.

Such transformation did not occur in a vacuum. Young voters often described intense social and psychological pressure when attempting to express divergent political views, especially in tightly knit religious families. In Aceh, where Islamic identity is strongly embedded in political rhetoric, to vote against the community’s preference was often seen not just as political betrayal, but as moral or religious deviance. One respondent recounted being told that choosing Jokowi was tantamount to being “kafir” – a label that carries deep spiritual and social implications (Interview with LF, Unimal, 10 May 2023). This practice, which borders on symbolic violence, illustrates the disciplinary function of identity politics in intimate spaces such as family and faith-based institutions.

Parallel pressures emerged in academic settings. Students who expressed support for non-majority candidates or who critiqued religiously loaded narratives reported being humiliated or harassed by lecturers. One student from

Unimal testified: “A lecturer mocked my political choice in front of the class. I felt ashamed, but it only strengthened my conviction” (Interview with S, 17 May 2023). These episodes constitute what this study terms *academic repression*, where formal educational authority becomes a vehicle for reinforcing identity-based conformity rather than encouraging critical engagement. As Fraser (1995) warned, when identity politics becomes prescriptive rather than emancipatory, it risks transforming institutions into sites of control rather than deliberation.

Despite these obstacles, some students found subtle ways to reclaim agency. They complied outwardly with family or faculty expectations but made independent decisions in the voting booth. Others openly discussed their choices with peers, forming small circles of support to buffer against familial or institutional backlash. This emergent behavior suggests the development of what Inglehart (1997) calls *cognitive liberation*—a process by which individuals gain the psychological tools to question dominant narratives and make decisions based on internalized values rather than external dictates.

Survey data reinforces this trend. While 23% of respondents in 2024 still named their father as the main influence on their political decisions, a majority—35%—claimed to rely on their own independent judgment, a notable increase from the 2019 data. This statistical shift, though modest, is politically profound. It reveals that while traditional sources of authority remain powerful, they are no longer hegemonic. Young voters are beginning to carve out subject positions of autonomy, balancing deference with dissent. In this light, resistance should not be understood merely as rejection, but as negotiation. Many youth remain embedded in families and institutions they respect. Yet they are also asserting the right to think differently. Their acts of political independence—however partial, however quiet—signal the emergence of a deliberative self, one that seeks not to destroy inherited authority, but to disentangle it from coercive conformity.

D. Conclusion

The political behavior of Generation Z in Aceh, as observed through the lens of the 2019 and 2024 presidential elections, reveals a quiet but profound generational reorientation. What began as a pattern of inherited political loyalty—deeply mediated by religious identity, family authority, and communal expectations—has gradually given way to a more evaluative and autonomous mode of democratic engagement. This shift, while not uniform, suggests that a significant segment of youth in conservative post-conflict settings are reconfiguring how political legitimacy is interpreted and enacted.

Three interrelated dynamics underpin this transformation. First, the decline of identity-based voting among Gen Z is more than a behavioral adjustment; it signals an epistemic shift toward political reasoning grounded in accountability, leadership integrity, and programmatic clarity. This redefinition

of electoral rationality, emerging within a sociopolitical culture long dominated by religious symbolism, marks a departure from ritualistic affirmation toward reflective agency. Second, the convergence of social media and academic discourse has created a dual environment for civic learning – offering both access to plural perspectives and spaces for deliberative exchange. These settings enabled youth to interrogate received truths, engage in political comparison, and navigate the ambiguities of belief and belonging. Third, and most crucially, the assertion of political autonomy has occurred not in neutral terrain, but within institutions saturated with moral and ideological surveillance. Families, classrooms, and religious networks continued to exert normative pressure, yet many youth responded through subtle resistance, selective compliance, and critical discernment.

This study contributes to ongoing debates about political subjectivity in post-authoritarian and religiously embedded democracies. It shows that identity, while enduring, is no longer monolithic or deterministic. Instead, it is increasingly refracted through ethical scrutiny, contextual judgment, and generational reinterpretation. In doing so, this research challenges dominant narratives that portray youth in conservative societies as apolitical or docile. Rather, they are engaging democracy in ways that disrupt simplistic binaries between loyalty and rebellion, tradition and modernity. The case of Aceh thus offers a compelling lens for understanding how political consciousness evolves under constraint—not as rupture, but as gradual negotiation. These findings underscore the importance of cultivating civic spaces where young people can think politically on their own terms, even within systems that demand conformity. For policymakers, educators, and democratic reformers, the message is clear: fostering meaningful participation among the next generation requires recognizing both the weight of inherited norms and the creative agency with which youth increasingly respond to them.

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