Student-led policy advocacy as living labs: Examining civic capability development in Indonesian higher education

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether living lab pedagogy develops civic capabilities in Indonesian university students. In a semester-long course, 98 students formed 20 teams executing authentic advocacy campaigns on self-selected policy issues. Using mixed methods (surveys, interviews, and document analysis), we assessed the development of civic capability across six domains. Teams collectively generated 127,000 petition signatures and engaged civil society organizations. Thematic analysis reveals that governance and justice issues dominated priorities (45%), with 65% of campaigns motivated by direct experiences of policy failure. Interview data (n=35) suggest shifts in civic identity and increased political efficacy. However, the study's preliminary nature, lack of comparison group, and limited follow-up constrain causal claims. Findings suggest living labs offer a promising pedagogical model, though longitudinal experimental research is needed.

1. Introduction

Political science educators face a persistent challenge: how to transform civic knowledge into civic action. While students can articulate democratic principles and analyze policy issues, they often lack the practical competencies and self-efficacy necessary for political engagement (Beaumont et al., 2006; Colby et al., 2007). This gap between knowledge and action is particularly pronounced in emerging democracies like Indonesia, where youth constitute 52% of the population yet remain largely absent from governance processes (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024).

The problem extends beyond individual disengagement. When the lived experiences and perspectives of young citizens are systematically excluded from policymaking, democratic legitimacy suffers and policy effectiveness declines (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). From a capability approach perspective (Sen, 1999), this exclusion represents not just a political problem but a development failure—the suppression of fundamental freedoms necessary for human flourishing.

This study investigates whether 'living lab' pedagogy can address this challenge. Living labs, originally developed in innovation studies (Almirall & Wareham, 2011), are real-world experimental environments where users co-create solutions to authentic problems. Bergvall-Kåreborn and Ståhlbröst (2009) define living labs by five characteristics: user involvement (end-users as co-

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creators rather than passive subjects), authentic contexts (real-world settings rather than laboratory conditions), multi-method approaches (combining qualitative and quantitative data), multi-stakeholder participation (involving diverse actors), and co-creation (collaborative innovation processes).

Similarly, Almirall and Wareham (2011) emphasize that living labs function as 'innovation arbiters,' mediating between top-down institutional initiatives and bottom-up user innovations. This intermediary role creates spaces where formal and informal knowledge interact, where expert and experiential knowledge cross-fertilize, and where conventional approaches confront practical challenges requiring adaptive solutions.

Recent scholarship extends living labs beyond technological innovation to social and governance challenges. Evans and Karvonen (2014) analyze urban living labs addressing climate change and sustainability, arguing that these spaces enable experimentation with governance arrangements and policy instruments that would be politically risky to implement at full scale. The living lab provides a 'safe space' for testing innovations while maintaining authentic stakes and consequences.

We adapt this concept to civic pedagogy by framing student-led policy advocacy campaigns as living labs for developing democratic capability. Students become co-creators of actual political interventions rather than passive recipients of civic instruction. Real-world policy contexts provide authentic settings where students encounter genuine stakeholders, face actual political constraints, and experience real consequences—whether success or failure. The pedagogical intervention combines structured support (theoretical frameworks, skills workshops, coaching) with substantial student autonomy over issue selection, strategy development, and tactical decisions.

This approach differs from service-learning in several ways. First, living labs center political advocacy rather than service provision, positioning students as citizens demanding accountability rather than volunteers providing assistance. Second, students select issues affecting their own communities or that concern them, collapsing the helper-helped distinction common in service-learning. Third, living labs explicitly aim to develop political capabilities and identity, not merely to provide community benefit or foster moral development.

Living labs also differ from simulations in that they maintain authentic stakes. When students launch real petitions visible to actual publics, engage actual stakeholders who may accept or refuse collaboration, and pursue policy changes that may or may not occur, they cannot retreat to 'this is just an assignment.' This authenticity fundamentally alters the psychological experience and, we hypothesize, the learning outcomes.

1.1. The Indonesian Context: Youth Exclusion in an Emerging Democracy

Indonesia provides an important context for this study. As the world's third-largest democracy with 275 million citizens (BPS, 2024), Indonesia represents a critical case for understanding democratic development in emerging democracies. Since the 1998 transition from authoritarianism, Indonesia has experienced democratic consolidation alongside persistent challenges, including corruption, weak rule of law, and elite domination of political institutions (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019).

Youth political exclusion represents a particular concern. Citizens aged 18–39 constitute 52% of the population (approximately 140 million people) yet hold minimal representation in elected office, bureaucratic leadership positions, or formal political party structures (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). Voter turnout among young Indonesians has declined since democratization, while trust in political institutions remains low (Mujani & Liddle, 2015).

However, Indonesian youth demonstrate capacity for political mobilization when they perceive authentic opportunities for influence. Student movements played crucial roles in the 1998 democratic transition and the 2019–2020 protests against labor law reforms and attempts to weaken anti-corruption institutions (Aspinall, 2012; Ardiyanto, 2021; Ramadlan & Aminuddin, 2025). This pattern suggests that youth 'apathy' may reflect rational assessment that conventional political channels offer minimal influence rather than inherent disinterest in governance.

Indonesian universities occupy ambiguous positions in this landscape. Elite institutions historically produced political and bureaucratic leaders, yet contemporary curricula emphasize technical expertise over civic engagement (Parker & Raihani, 2011). Whether higher education may contribute to democratic vitality rather than elite reproduction remains an open question. Given this background, this exploratory study addresses three questions: (1) What policy issues do students prioritize when given agency to select their own advocacy topics? (2) What civic capabilities do students develop through authentic policy advocacy practice? And (3) How do students describe changes in their civic identities and political efficacy?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Traditional Civic Education and the Knowledge–Action Gap

Research on civic education has long demonstrated a persistent disjunction between what students know about democracy and how they act within it (Galston, 2001; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Traditional civic education, which emphasizes transmission of factual knowledge about institutions, procedures, and constitutional principles, reliably increases students' cognitive understanding of political systems yet fails to generate durable changes in political participation, civic efficacy, or sustained engagement (Galston, 2001; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Meta-analytic and longitudinal studies confirm this pattern. Students emerge better informed about government structures and democratic norms but remain largely disengaged from political action beyond the classroom (Niemi & Junn, 1998; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002). This "knowing without doing" paradox has troubled civic education scholarship for decades. Even when students can articulate democratic ideals and analyze policy processes with sophistication, such competencies do not translate into participation in collective decision making or political mobilization (Levinson, 2012). The durability of this gap suggests that the core problem in civic education is not a lack of information but the absence of conditions that enable students to act politically.

2.2. Experiential and Service-Learning Approaches

In response to these limitations, scholars and educators have increasingly turned to experiential and service-learning approaches that emphasize participation, reflection, and engagement beyond conventional classroom instruction. A substantial body of evidence indicates that such approaches outperform traditional instruction on a range of civic outcomes. Celio et al. (2011), in a meta-analysis of 62 studies, report significant positive effects on civic attitudes, civic skills, and civic behaviors. These findings appear to support the claim that learning through experience produces more robust civic outcomes than learning through instruction alone.

However, critical scholarship raises concerns about the form and substance of many experiential interventions. Service-learning programs often position students as privileged providers of assistance to marginalized communities rather than as political actors engaged in collective problem solving (Mitchell, 2008). This helper orientation risks reinforcing social hierarchies and depoliticizing structural problems. Moreover, many experiential activities take place in highly managed settings such as classroom simulations or preselected service sites, where outcomes are limited in scope

and consequences remain minimal. As Gee (2003) argues, when participants recognize that an activity lacks real stakes, the psychological and motivational dynamics differ fundamentally from those present in authentic practice. Under such conditions, experiential engagement may produce short-term attitudinal shifts without cultivating capacities that transfer to real political contexts.

Experiential learning theory offers important insight into why experience matters, yet it also reveals the limits of experience alone. Kolb's (1984) model emphasizes iterative cycles of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation as the basis of deep learning. This framework builds on Dewey's (1916) argument that democratic education must involve participation in democratic practice rather than abstract study of democratic ideals. Applied to civic education, experiential learning theory suggests that students develop understanding through action and reflection rather than prior knowledge acquisition.

Empirical research on youth political participation aligns with this claim (Galston, 2001; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Longitudinal studies show that direct engagement in political activities during adolescence predicts adult civic involvement more strongly than civic knowledge or formal instruction (Youniss et al., 2002). Participation in voluntary associations that pursue collective goals also generates lasting increases in political engagement across the life course (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Yet experiential learning theory remains largely procedural. It explains how learning occurs through experience but does not specify whether educational environments expand students' real opportunities to act as political agents beyond the learning setting itself.

Evidence suggests that the most durable effects of experiential civic engagement operate through identity formation rather than attitude change alone (Galston, 2001; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Through sustained participation in authentic political activity, young people come to view themselves as legitimate political actors with the right and capacity to influence collective outcomes (Wray-Lake & Sloper, 2016). This identity shift alters how individuals perceive their relationship to political institutions and their own sense of agency within them. However, identity transformation depends on the availability of genuine opportunities to exercise agency. Experiences that are tightly scripted, externally controlled, or symbolically political may fail to produce such shifts. This limitation points to the need for a framework that evaluates civic education not only in terms of experience or participation but in terms of the freedoms that educational settings actually enable.

2.3. Theoretical Framework: The Capability Approach

The capability approach provides such a framework by reorienting evaluation from resources and outcomes toward substantive freedoms. Sen (1999) defines capabilities as the real opportunities individuals have to achieve valued ways of being and doing. From this perspective, education should be assessed by what students become able to do rather than by what they know or what outcomes they produce. Nussbaum (2011) identifies political participation as a central human capability that underpins dignity and democratic self-governance. Applied to civic education, this approach implies that instruction which transmits knowledge or facilitates participation without expanding students' freedom to act politically fails to meet its normative purpose (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Civic capability, understood in this sense, encompasses analytical capacities to understand policy problems and power relations, communicative capacities to articulate claims and engage deliberatively, relational capacities to build coalitions and sustain collective action, and agential capacities grounded in self-efficacy and a sense of political entitlement (Robeyns, 2005).

A capability-based perspective clarifies why many experiential and service-learning interventions produce limited or uneven effects. When students participate without autonomy over issue selection,

strategy, or goals, their capability sets remain constrained even if participation occurs. Capability-enhancing pedagogy, therefore, requires educational environments that allow students to exercise political agency in authentic contexts, with meaningful choices and real consequences. Following Sen's (1999) emphasis on agency as intrinsically valuable, such pedagogy must treat students not as implementers of predefined activities but as authors of political action. The objective is not merely to generate participation or measurable civic outcomes but to expand students' real freedoms to engage in collective self-governance if they choose to do so. From this standpoint, students who acquire civic capabilities yet opt not to participate politically have still experienced capability expansion, whereas students who remain unable to act despite motivation experience a form of civic capability deprivation.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employs an exploratory mixed-methods case study design (Yin, 2014). The case study design was adopted because the living lab model constitutes a bounded, context-specific intervention whose implementation logic and participant experiences cannot be adequately captured through survey or experimental methods alone. Thus, this research integrated quantitative descriptive data (campaign metrics, participation counts) with qualitative thematic analysis of artifacts and interviews. Quantitative data are reported descriptively to characterize the scope and scale of campaign activities (without applying inferential statistical tests), consistent with the study's exploratory purpose. Meanwhile, the qualitative approach (purposive interview sampling, thematic content analysis, and artifact analysis) was employed because the primary research questions concern process, meaning, and identity change, which require interpretive methods to address adequately.

3.2. Setting and Participants

The study took place in a required Policy Advocacy and Conflict Management course at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia, during the February–June 2024 semester. The course enrolled 98 undergraduate students in the Department of Public Policy and Management, distributed across two sections: a regular Indonesian-language track (n=78) and an international English-language track (n=20). Student demographics reflected the department's typical composition: 62% female, mean age 20.3 years (range: 18–24), predominantly from urban middle-class backgrounds (73%). Approximately one-third (34%) reported prior involvement in student organizations or civic groups. All students provided informed consent for participation in this research study.

3.3. Course Structure and Living Lab Design

Students formed 20 self-selected teams of 4–5 members each. Self-selection enabled students to work with peers who shared their interests while introducing potential confounds (stronger teams may have resulted from prior friendships or complementary skills rather than from pedagogy alone). Each team received one assignment: design and implement a policy advocacy campaign addressing an Indonesian public policy issue of your choice.

This open-ended charge aimed to maximize student agency while establishing several boundaries. First, campaigns must address Indonesian policy issues rather than international or global topics, ensuring local relevance and the feasibility of stakeholder engagement. Second, campaigns must focus on public policy and institutional change rather than charity or direct service provision. Third, campaigns required four deliverables: (1) a written policy analysis document (2,500–3,500 words); (2)

an online petition using the Change.org Indonesia platform; (3) a multi-platform campaign strategy; and (4) a presentation (20 minutes) documenting campaign objectives, strategies, outcomes, and lessons learned.

The semester followed four phases informed by action research methodology and experiential learning cycles. Phase 1 (foundation weeks) introduced theoretical frameworks through interactive seminars covering policy advocacy theories (advocacy coalition framework, multiple streams approach), stakeholder analysis methods (power-interest matrices, influence mapping), and conflict-sensitive engagement principles. Phase 2 (design weeks) supported campaign planning: teams selected issues through structured brainstorming, conducted initial policy analysis, mapped stakeholders, and developed campaign theories of change. Instructors provided feedback on draft documents, challenging assumptions, and identifying strategic gaps. Phase 3 (implementation weeks) constituted the core living lab experience. Teams launched petitions, created social media content, reached out to stakeholders, and adapted strategies based on responses received. Weekly coaching sessions (90 minutes) followed action research cycles: teams described actions taken, reported results observed, analyzed what worked and what did not, and planned next steps. Phase 4 (reflection weeks) emphasized structured debriefing. Teams presented campaigns that articulated not just what they did but also what they learned.

3.4. Data Collection

We employed multiple data sources to triangulate and capture both the process and outcome dimensions of civic capability development. Campaign artifacts included all team-produced written policy analyses (20 documents totaling approximately 500 pages of text plus multimedia content), online petitions, social media content (342 discrete posts: 156 Instagram, 104 Twitter/X, 82 TikTok), stakeholder communications, and final presentation materials. These underwent qualitative content analysis examining: issue framing and problem definition, quality of evidence mobilized, sophistication of stakeholder analysis, strategic coherence, ethical considerations articulated, and rhetorical tactics employed.

Campaign metrics included quantitative outcome indicators: petition signature totals (updated weekly), social media engagement, media coverage, stakeholder responses, and documented policy impacts. Following course completion and grade submission—to minimize coercion—we conducted individual semi-structured interviews with 35 students from all 20 teams via stratified purposive sampling, ensuring representation across teams, language tracks, and levels of visible engagement. Interviews averaged 75 minutes (range: 45–110 minutes) and explored motivations for issue selection, perceived skill development, challenges encountered, changes in civic identity and political efficacy, and critical assessment of the living lab model. The instructor maintained detailed weekly field notes documenting team dynamics, strategic decision-making processes, ethical dilemmas, and pedagogical interventions. Additional materials included early brainstorming documents, draft stakeholder maps with instructor feedback, peer review comments, and individual reflection papers (500 words) from each student.

3.5. Data Analysis

Campaign artifacts underwent content analysis to identify issue domains, advocacy goals, stakeholder strategies, and rhetorical framing. Campaign metrics were catalogued descriptively. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial open coding identified recurring patterns in student responses. Focused coding grouped these into higher-order themes. Member checking was conducted with six participants to assess the

interpretive accuracy of preliminary thematic findings. All qualitative data were managed using ATLAS.ti. We triangulated findings across data sources, looking for convergence and divergence. Where student self-reports conflicted with campaign artifacts or instructor observations, we noted these discrepancies rather than privileging one source.

4. Findings

Across 20 teams and 98 students, this study documents three broad sets of findings. First, students concentrated their policy advocacy on governance accountability and social justice issues (70% of campaigns), with 65% of campaigns motivated by personal or family exposure to policy failures. Second, all teams demonstrated evidence of policy analysis and public communication capabilities; most teams (85–95%) developed digital advocacy and stakeholder engagement capabilities, while coalition building (40%) and ethical negotiation (55%) were less universal but emerged when situational demands required them. Third, interview data (n=35) suggest that many students (74%) experienced shifts in civic identity, moving from political observers to political actors, with reported increases in political efficacy tied more strongly to external recognition by institutional actors than to instructor feedback. Where the following sections present descriptive patterns derived from campaign artifacts and metrics, readers should note that interpretive claims about capability development and identity change are drawn from qualitative interview analysis and are necessarily more tentative. Causal claims are not warranted given the study's exploratory, single-site design and lack of a comparison group.

All 20 teams successfully completed their campaigns, demonstrating the basic feasibility of the living lab model. Collectively, students generated 127,450 petition signatures (range: 423–34,670 per campaign; median: 4,235). Teams produced 342 social media posts, sent 167 stakeholder communications, and secured 8 formal meetings with government officials or civil society organizations. Three campaigns reported achieving tangible policy outcomes: strengthened enforcement of municipal smoke-free zones in Yogyakarta, increased access to disability services at the university, and modifications to local public transportation routes to improve accessibility. While we cannot definitively establish causality between student campaigns and these changes, stakeholders acknowledged student advocacy in policy discussions.

Analysis of campaign topics reveals distinct patterns in student policy priorities (Table 1). Governance and institutional accountability issues dominated, comprising 45% of campaigns (9 of 20). These included advocating against military involvement in civilian state enterprises, demanding anti-corruption legislation, critiquing structural inefficiencies in government, and challenging proposed expansions of military legal authority. Social justice and labor rights campaigns accounted for 25% (5 of 20), focusing on marginalized populations, including disability inclusion in education, social protection for informal workers, age-based employment discrimination, and teacher wage equity. Urban infrastructure campaigns constituted 20% (4 of 20), addressing everyday service failures: pedestrian safety, public transportation adequacy, and smoke-free zone enforcement. Environmental justice campaigns appeared in 10% (2 of 20) of cases, addressing land conflicts and forest protection.

Table 1 *Distribution of Campaign Topics by Policy Domain (N=20)*

Policy Domain	Campaigns	Percentage
Governance & Accountability	9	45%

Policy Domain	Campaigns	Percentage
Social Justice & Labor Rights	5	25%
Urban Infrastructure	4	20%
Environmental Justice	2	10%
Total	20	100%

Interview data revealed that 65% of campaigns (13 of 20) were motivated primarily by students' direct experiences with policy failures—either personal encounters or close observation of injustice affecting family members or community members. As one student explained:

> "My aunt is an informal food vendor, which means she doesn't have access to benefits like insurance or a pension. When she fell ill, the financial impact on my family was huge. I admit, I used to view that as just a private family issue. However, this course shifted my perspective entirely. I now understand it as a structural problem...[specifically], how policy choices often exclude workers like her from the protections that formal employees receive."

This distribution contradicts the common assumption that young people primarily care about lifestyle or identity issues, divorced from governance structures. Instead, student priorities centered on institutional accountability, systemic reform, and the protection of vulnerable populations—issues that require confronting entrenched interests and fundamental shifts in power. It should be noted, however, that this relationship between issue selection and personal experience was based on self-report data collected at the end of the course; it may reflect post hoc attribution rather than a preexisting primary motivation.

4.1. Civic Capability Development

Document analysis combined with interview data indicates that students developed civic capabilities across six domains (Table 2). Evidence for these capabilities comes from triangulation of campaign artifacts, interview transcripts, and instructor observations collected over the semester. These capabilities did not develop in a uniform or linear manner. Some appeared early and deepened through repeated use, while others remained uneven or context-dependent and were only partially articulated by students.

Table 2 *Evidence of Civic Capability Development Across Teams (N=20)*

Capability Domain	Teams (N=20)	Percentage
Policy Analysis	20	100%
Digital Advocacy	19	95%
Stakeholder Mapping & Engagement	17	85%
Ethical Negotiation	11	55%
Coalition Building	8	40%
Public Communication	20	100%

Policy analysis was the most consistently observable capability across teams. All groups identified a policy problem, moved beyond surface description, and proposed at least one plausible intervention in their written briefs. Although the quality of analysis varied substantially, comparisons between early drafts and final submissions show improvement in most cases. Instructors also observed that policy analysis did not remain confined to the briefing stage. As campaigns unfolded, teams revisited their problem definitions in response to stakeholder feedback and implementation constraints. In some cases, this process narrowed the focus of the campaign; in others, it led to a reframing of the policy problem itself.

Digital advocacy developed less predictably. Nineteen teams (95%) made sustained use of social media, but few began with a clear understanding of how different platforms function politically. Interview data show that awareness of platform differences emerged primarily through experimentation rather than prior knowledge or formal instruction. Students often described changing content or tone after observing limited engagement, but were not always able to explain why those changes mattered. One student remarked, "We just saw that some posts didn't get any response, so we stopped doing that." Over time, several teams began to distinguish between content aimed at public attention and materials intended for policy-facing audiences, though this distinction often remained implicit rather than analytically explicit.

Questions of influence became more salient as campaigns progressed, which led to the development of stakeholder mapping and engagement capabilities. Seventeen teams (85%) produced stakeholder maps that identified relevant actors and their interests. Early versions of these maps frequently prioritized actors who shared the team's normative position. This pattern reflected an initial tendency to equate agreement with political importance. Instructor feedback and stalled outreach efforts prompted some teams to revise this approach and focus on actors with decision-making authority or indirect leverage. These shifts usually occurred after campaigns encountered obstacles rather than through advanced strategic planning.

The military enterprise campaign illustrates this pattern. The team initially concentrated outreach on civil society groups that already opposed military involvement in commercial activities. When this strategy produced little movement, the team redirected attention toward business associations and reform-oriented officials whose interests only partially overlapped with the campaign's normative goals. Although the campaign did not result in policy change, the reorientation itself reflected a more strategic understanding of influence. As one student noted, "...[we] realized we were mostly talking to people who already agreed with us, and that didn't really go anywhere."

Coalition-building was less common and more uneven. Eight teams (40%) worked with external organizations during the semester, most often in policy areas where established civil society actors were involved. Students involved in these campaigns described coalition work as difficult to sustain within a single semester. Several reported challenges related to coordination, differing priorities, and limited responsiveness from partner organizations. In contrast to policy analysis or digital advocacy, coalition building often remained fragile and contingent. This pattern suggests—tentatively, given the small number of cases—that coalition capacity may require longer time horizons and institutional continuity that short-term living labs cannot easily provide.

Ethical negotiation emerged most clearly when campaigns encountered competing claims that could not be resolved through technical fixes. Eleven teams (55%) faced such tensions. In the sidewalk regulation campaign, the team initially framed the issue in terms of pedestrian safety and accessibility. Engagement with street vendors complicated this framing by highlighting the livelihood consequences of enforcement. Students described this moment as unsettling rather than clarifying.

One student stated, "After talking to them [street vendors], it didn't feel like there was a clean solution anymore." The team ultimately proposed differentiated regulation that combined stricter enforcement in high-risk areas with greater flexibility elsewhere. While the proposal did not resolve the underlying conflict, it reflected an effort to confront ethical trade-offs rather than avoid them.

Public communication was a universal requirement, but showed substantial variation in development. All teams presented their campaigns publicly, and most demonstrated greater familiarity and confidence over time. Improvement, however, was uneven. Some students became more effective speakers as they gained command of their material, while others remained hesitant despite strong substantive work. This variation suggests that public communication may be less responsive to short-term experiential learning than analytical or strategic capabilities and may depend more strongly on prior experience and cultural norms.

4.2. Civic Identity Transformation

Interview analysis points to three patterns of change in civic identity, though these shifts were neither uniform nor complete among students. To note, however, these patterns are drawn from self-report data and should be interpreted as accounts of subjective experience rather than objectively verified transformation. Their durability beyond the course cannot be assessed from the present data. Rather than reflecting a wholesale transformation, identity change appeared episodic and closely tied to moments of interaction with political institutions and actors.

A first pattern involved a shift from political observation to political action. Many students (26 of 35 interviewed, 74%) described a change in how they understood their relationship to politics. Prior to the course, they tended to position themselves as observers or as future participants whose political relevance would come later. Campaign experience altered this perception for some students, particularly when their outreach elicited responses from officials or organizations. As one student explained, "When they actually replied to our letters and agreed to meet, even though they didn't support what we wanted, it felt like they were treating us as real actors." For these students, recognition by institutional actors mattered more than agreement. It disrupted the assumption that political voice is reserved for those with age, status, or formal authority.

A second pattern related to confidence, which students frequently tied to demonstrated competence rather than encouragement. Many contrasted abstract affirmations with the experience of producing work that others took seriously. One student noted, "It's different when someone says you're capable and when you see that people actually read what you wrote." Confidence in this sense emerged unevenly and often late in the semester. It appeared strongest among students who completed tangible outputs such as policy briefs or meetings with stakeholders.

A third pattern involved a more realistic understanding of political change. Students described learning that advocacy is slow, contested, and shaped by power asymmetries. Several noted frustrations with resistance from officials or the limited impact of their efforts. At the same time, this realism did not translate into disengagement. Instead, some students reported feeling more prepared to engage because their expectations had shifted. As one student put it, "I don't think change is easy anymore, but at least now I know what makes it hard." This suggests that exposure to political constraint can coexist with sustained motivation, provided students interpret difficulty as structural rather than personal failure.

Across interviews and course materials, three pedagogical features appear to be associated with these outcomes. These mechanisms operated unevenly across campaigns and interacted with one another rather than functioning independently. First, authentic stakes mattered. Students

consistently described investing more effort in campaigns than in typical coursework because their actions had consequences beyond grading. Accountability to external audiences, rather than to instructors alone, appeared to motivate greater care and persistence. Second, failure functioned as a learning opportunity under specific conditions. Several teams encountered setbacks, including unresponsive stakeholders, ineffective tactics, or strategic misjudgments. Because the assessment emphasized learning processes rather than outcomes, these experiences did not automatically translate into penalties. Teams that revisited failed strategies and adjusted their approach often reported deeper learning than teams whose campaigns proceeded smoothly. Third, agency over issue selection played a central role. Students' ability to choose advocacy topics shaped both persistence and emotional investment. Interviews indicate that campaigns connected to personal experience or local observation generated stronger commitment, especially when progress was slow.

5. Discussion

These findings challenge dominant explanations of youth political disengagement that rely on claims of apathy. The apathy thesis attributes low participation to generational narcissism, digital distraction, or weak civic motivation (Putnam, 2000; Twenge, 2017). This framing has shaped civic education and policy interventions for decades. Most responses emphasize inspiration through improved curricula, engaging instructional formats, or gamified participation platforms. Despite sustained investment, these approaches have produced limited and short-lived behavioral effects (Manning & Edwards, 2014).

The evidence presented here supports a different interpretation. When institutional barriers were reduced, and students were given genuine authority to act on policy issues they considered meaningful, participation was neither minimal nor reluctant. Students devoted time and effort well beyond standard coursework expectations. Many persisted despite repeated setbacks. Several articulated intentions to remain civically active after course completion. These patterns are inconsistent with explanations rooted in motivational deficit.

Student issue selection further undermines the apathy narrative. Rather than concentrating on lifestyle or symbolic identity concerns, nearly half of all campaigns focused on governance accountability and institutional reform. These issues required engagement with complex regulatory structures and confrontation with entrenched power relations. Campaigns addressed military involvement in state enterprises, anti-corruption legislation, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Such choices are difficult to reconcile with claims of political indifference.

However, this interpretation aligns with scholarship that reframes youth disengagement as a rational response to exclusionary political systems rather than individual failure (Cammaerts et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2010). When participation mechanisms offer voice without influence or consultation without authority, withdrawal is a reasonable response. The central problem is, therefore, not about insufficient motivation but institutional designs that suppress civic capability. Under these conditions, efforts to inspire participation misdiagnose the source of disengagement.

5.1. From Lived Experience to Political Action

A notable finding is that 65% of campaigns originated from students' direct encounters with policy failures affecting them, their families, or their communities. This "pain-to-policy" trajectory has implications for both civic motivation and pedagogical design. Here, Freire's concept of conscientization provides a useful interpretive lens (Freire, 1970). Students were not indifferent to injustice. They lacked analytic frameworks that connected personal hardship to structural decision-making. Once equipped with policy tools, students reframed experiences such as informal labor

precarity, disability exclusion, and wage violations as outcomes of deliberate institutional choices rather than private misfortune.

This pattern complicates dominant service-learning models. Conventional service-learning often positions students as helpers addressing problems experienced by others (Mitchell, 2008). In contrast, the living lab model placed students in the position of affected stakeholders. This shift appears central to the depth of engagement observed. Emotional investment was not produced by empathy alone but by proximity to harm.

At the same time, this dynamic raises equity concerns. Students from marginalized backgrounds may bear heavier emotional burdens when coursework draws directly on personal or familial trauma. Without adequate safeguards, such pedagogy risks reproducing inequality within the classroom. Future implementations must balance authenticity with care, while also ensuring that more privileged students confront structural injustice beyond their immediate experience.

5.2. Capability Development Through Authentic Practice

The breadth of capability development observed across six domains supports claims from experiential learning theory that competencies emerge through practice rather than instruction alone (Dewey, 1916; Kolb, 1984). The mechanism, however, extends beyond simple exposure to activity. First, authentic stakes played a decisive role. Students invested effort because campaigns had real-world consequences. They interacted with actual citizens, organizations, and officials. Accountability extended beyond the instructor. One student stated that careless work would mislead people who trusted them enough to sign a petition. External responsibility altered the meaning of academic performance in ways that simulated exercises rarely achieve (Newmann et al., 2007).

Second, failure functioned as a learning catalyst when the assessment focused on reasoning and adaptation rather than outcomes. Several teams encountered resistance, strategic misjudgments, or public disengagement. A grading system tied to campaign success would have penalized these experiences. Process-oriented assessment made failure analytically productive (Kapur, 2008). Teams that revised strategies after setbacks often demonstrated the strongest learning outcomes.

Third, capability development varied across domains. Policy analysis and digital advocacy were nearly universal. Coalition building and ethical negotiation appeared in fewer than two-thirds of campaigns. This variation reflects the issue's characteristics rather than an instructional omission. Some campaigns did not require alliances or value trade-offs. The implication is that a single living lab cannot guarantee uniform acquisition of capabilities. Competencies develop in response to situational demand rather than curricular intent.

5.3. Civic Identity and Political Efficacy

The most consequential outcome is the reported shift in civic identity. Students moved from viewing political participation as a future possibility to recognizing themselves as current political actors. This change corresponds to Bandura's concept of mastery experience, which identifies successful task completion as a primary source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). In this research, students distinguished sharply between encouragement and evidence. Being told they had political potential carried limited weight. Producing work that external actors treated as legitimate had a different effect. Writing policy briefs that received responses, engaging officials who replied substantively, and interacting with journalists provided concrete confirmation of competence.

This distinction clarifies why information-based civic education often fails to build efficacy. Verbal affirmation is weaker than demonstrated capacity. However, external recognition was central to this process. Responses from government agencies, civil society organizations, and media actors

signaled legitimacy that instructor feedback could not replicate. Civic identity shifted through social acknowledgment rather than internal reflection alone.

To note, however, these findings require caution. Self-reported identity change may reflect social desirability bias, especially in instructor-led research contexts. The absence of longitudinal data prevents assessment of durability after graduation. It also remains unclear whether similar transformations could emerge in conventional civic education under optimal conditions. These limitations position the findings as suggestive rather than definitive.

5.4. Implications for Political Science Education

If corroborated by further research, living labs offer several advantages for political science education. The model is adaptable across course types and institutional contexts without extraordinary material investment. While instructor workload is substantial, the essential components remain transferable.

Living labs also address the long-standing tension between content coverage and skill development. Theory and practice are not sequenced but integrated. Students acquire policy frameworks while simultaneously applying them. This integration may be more pedagogically efficient than treating analytical knowledge and civic skill as separate objectives.

More fundamentally, living labs reposition universities as arenas of democratic practice rather than sites of detached observation. When student campaigns produce measurable policy effects, universities become participants in democratic processes. This orientation aligns with conceptions of engaged scholarship and public work pedagogy (Boyer, 1996; Boyte, 2004).

5.5. Broader Implications for Democracy and Development

Beyond pedagogy, these findings speak to democratic participation in emerging democracies. Indonesia combines a large youth population with democratic stagnation and narrowing civic space. Whether this demographic configuration yields renewal or instability depends on the development of political capability. From a capability perspective, exclusion from meaningful participation constitutes developmental failure regardless of economic performance (Sen, 1999). Civic education that expands political agency, therefore, serves development objectives rather than educational ones alone.

The prominence of governance reform in student campaigns suggests unmet demand for systemic change among educated youth. Universities that cultivate such capacity may contribute to democratic vitality. This potential depends on institutional leadership and political tolerance. Neither can be assumed where youth mobilization threatens established interests.

6. Conclusion

This exploratory study provides preliminary evidence that living lab pedagogy—student-designed policy advocacy campaigns—may offer a promising approach to civic capability development in political science education. While methodological limitations preclude strong causal claims, the findings suggest that authentic advocacy practice can develop multiple civic competencies and transform how students understand themselves as political actors.

The living lab model warrants further investigation through more rigorous research designs. If subsequent studies confirm these preliminary findings, the approach could offer political science educators a scalable framework for transforming higher education institutions from sites of civic knowledge transmission to laboratories for democratic practice.

6.1. Limitations

This study has significant limitations that constrain interpretation. First is the absence of a comparison group. Without a control condition, no causal claim can be made about the specific contribution of living lab pedagogy. Observed changes may reflect normal developmental trajectories, exposure to course content independent of the living lab format, or unobserved contextual factors.

Second is the dual role of instructor and researcher, which introduces additional risk of response bias. Students may have reported favorable experiences to align with perceived instructor expectations or to express gratitude for course support. Although data collection occurred after course completion and involved external interviewers, these safeguards cannot eliminate social desirability effects. Reported identity shifts and capability gains should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Third, the study also lacks longitudinal evidence. Outcomes were measured at the end of a single semester. It remains unknown whether reported capabilities or transformations in civic identity persist once students leave the structured university environment. Follow-up surveys are planned at six months, but these data are not yet available. Claims about durability must therefore remain provisional.

Fourth, generalizability is limited. The analysis draws on a single course at one "elite" Indonesian university. Institutional resources, student selectivity, and political context likely shaped both implementation and outcomes. Results may not transfer to less resourced institutions, different national settings, or student populations facing higher political risk. The model may function differently under conditions of repression or material constraint.

6.2. Future Research Directions

Given these limitations, future research should address these weaknesses directly. Priority directions include: (1) experimental or quasi-experimental designs that compare living lab pedagogy with conventional instruction; (2) longitudinal studies that observe participants over extended periods to assess durability of capability and identity change; (3) replication across varied institutional and political contexts to test generalizability; (4) more rigorous measurement strategies assessing capability development through validated instruments and observable behaviors rather than self-report alone; and (5) attention to equity implications, examining whether the model produces differential outcomes for students from marginalized versus privileged backgrounds.

7. Declarations

7.1. Author Contributions (CRediT)

The author solely conceived the study, designed the methodology, conducted the analysis, interpreted the results, and wrote the manuscript.

7.2. Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

7.3. Funding Statement

The author declares that the study received no funding.

7.4. Data Availability Statement

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to participant confidentiality agreements.

7.5. Ethics Approval

N/A

7.6. Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

This manuscript was reviewed with the assistance of an AI tool (Google Gemini) for language editing and stylistic refinement only. The study design, data, analysis, and conclusions are entirely original and produced by the author.

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