Liberal or lost? How political education and social media shape the ideological maze of students

Liberal atau tersesat? Bagaimana pendidikan politik dan media sosial membentuk labirin ideologi mahasiswa

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Abstract

The ideological orientation and political attitudes of students are influenced by formal political education and exposure to social media; however, the interaction between these two factors in shaping ideological coherence, flexibility, and complexity remains underexplored. This study employs Patrick H. O'Neil's theoretical framework to analyze the spectrum of political ideologies beyond the traditional left-right dichotomy. Using a descriptive-comparative quantitative method, a survey involving 200 political science and non-political science students. The research reveals that political education does not always foster ideological consistency but rather enhances ideological diversity and flexibility. Political science students exhibit moderate ideological diversity, demonstrating openness to a broad spectrum of ideologies, including fascism and communism, particularly in discussions about corruption, the military, and political parties. However, this diversity does not correlate with a stronger inclination toward liberalism. In contrast, non-political science students display slightly higher ideological consistency, with a predominant leaning toward social democracy. While social media facilitates incidental exposure to political discourse, its role in driving ideological transformation appears limited. Furthermore, this study challenges the classic assumption that structured political education inherently promotes liberal attitudes, underscoring the need for an adaptive educational framework that accounts for the complexities of political engagement in the digital era.

Keywords: political attitudes; political education; political ideology; political science students; social media

Abstrak

Orientasi ideologis dan sikap politik mahasiswa dipengaruhi oleh pendidikan politik formal dan paparan media sosial, namun interaksi antara kedua faktor ini dalam membentuk koherensi, fleksibilitas, dan kompleksitas ideologis masih kurang dieksplorasi. Penelitian ini menggunakan kerangka teoritis Patrick H. O'Neil untuk menganalisis spektrum ideologi politik yang melampaui dikotomi kiri-kanan tradisional. Dengan menggunakan metode kuantitatif deskriptif-komparatif, survei terhadap 200 mahasiswa ilmu politik dan non-ilmu politik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendidikan politik tidak selalu mendorong konsistensi ideologi, melainkan memperluas keragaman dan fleksibilitas ideologis. Mahasiswa ilmu politik menunjukkan tingkat keragaman ideologi moderat dengan keterbukaan terhadap berbagai spektrum ideologi, termasuk fasisme dan komunisme, terutama dalam isu korupsi, militer, dan partai politik. Namun, keragaman ini tidak berkorelasi dengan kecenderungan yang lebih kuat terhadap liberalisme. Sebaliknya, mahasiswa non-ilmu politik menunjukkan konsistensi ideologi yang sedikit lebih tinggi dengan kecenderungan dominan terhadap sosial demokrasi. Media sosial memfasilitasi paparan insidental terhadap wacana politik, namun perannya dalam mendorong transformasi ideologi terbukti terbatas. Studi ini juga mempertanyakan ulang asumsi klasik bahwa pendidikan politik yang terstruktur secara inheren mendorong sikap liberal, sehingga menekankan perlunya kerangka pendidikan adaptif yang mempertimbangkan kompleksitas keterlibatan politik di era digital.

Kata Kunci: *sikap politik; pendidikan politik; ideologi politik; mahasiswa ilmu politik; media sosial*

Introduction

In recent years, the rise of digital political engagement has reshaped how young people form their political ideologies (Mintz 1998, Wang 2019). Social media has become a dominant platform for political discourse (Gong & Zuo 2020, He et al. 2021), while formal political education remains a key

factor in shaping ideological perspectives (Willeck & Mendelberg 2022). Despite the increasing role of social media and formal education in shaping students' political attitudes, the extent to which these forces interact remains unclear.

How students develop political ideologies has long been a topic of academic interest, particularly in relation to their social context, interpersonal interactions, and participation in student organizations within higher education settings (Hanson et al. 2012, Strother et al. 2021). More recently, some scholars have expanded their focus—not to discard earlier approaches, but to account for new layers of complexity in how students construct political identity. These include the evolving trajectories of political thought (Ringstad 2014), students' socioeconomic positions during their university years (Bailey & Williams 2016, Demel et al. 2019), and the institutional framework that shape political discourse and policy within academic environments (Luescher 2015, Kaftan & Linantud 2021).

Ideological development rarely follows a straight path; instead, it often evolves through ongoing, situated negotiations shaped by institutional forces and social environments. However, formal education still plays a role (Yuan 2023), nor can it be reduced to the integration of digital technologies into learning environment (Rui 2022, Yu & Qi 2024). Altogether, these influences illustrate just how multifaceted student political identity can be—rarely fitting into tidy categories or fixed ideological molds.

While international scholarship has explored ideological development from a range of perspectives, research on political education in Indonesia remains limited—not only in volume, but also in thematic diversity. Most existing studies tend to concentrate on youth political engagement during electoral moments (Annas et al. 2019, Sosiawan & Wibowo 2020, Simanjuntak 2021, Fathurochman & Tutiasri 2023, Wulandari et al. 2023). A rare exception can be found in Ardi & Pradiri's (2021) study, which explores confirmation bias within students' social media behavior. Their study draws attention to the psychological undercurrents of political thinking—especially relevant as digital platforms become central to how information is processed.

However, their study leaves an open question: do these patterns of bias manifest similarly across student populations? In particular, how do students who formally study politics differ from their peers in navigating ideological cues online? In contrast, international studies offer a more diverse picture of ideological consistency, although still limited to specific contexts. For example, Demel et al. (2019) link students' ideological positions with their preferences for redistributive policies. Meanwhile, Bailey (2016) finds that although students tend to be consistent in their economic views, they often display incoherence on social issues. Another study by Ringstad (2014) observes stability in students' moderate-liberal orientation.

Nevertheless, most studies examining ideological variation remain confined to the left-right spectrum, overlooking broader ideological preferences. O'Neil (2018:81) defines political ideology as a set of values regarding the fundamental goals of politics, while political attitudes reflect views on the pace and scope of change needed to balance freedom and equality He identifies five dominant ideologies: liberalism, communism, social democracy, fascism, and anarchism. Liberalism prioritizes individual freedom and limited state intervention, whereas anarchism rejects the state entirely. Communism promotes state control of economic resources for social equality, fascism elevates the state as the ultimate authority, and social democracy balances state welfare provisions with market mechanisms and civil liberties.

Political attitudes, meanwhile, are categorized into four types: radical, liberal, conservative, and reactionary (O'Neil 2018:77-81). Radicals support revolutionary change, liberals endorse reform, conservatives aim to preserve the status quo, and reactionaries advocate a return to previous systems. This study also introduces *pragmatism* as a fifth category—an adaptable orientation shaped by situational considerations. While prior research has explored the influence of political education and social media separately, few have examined how their interaction shapes students' ideological diversity and political attitudes. Addressing this gap, this study investigates whether political education fosters ideological coherence or fragmentation in the context of growing digital political engagement.

Utilizing O'Neil's framework, which integrates political change dynamics beyond the traditional left–right spectrum, this study classifies students into three categories of ideological diversity: low (consistency), moderate (flexibility), and high (complexity). The analysis traces how educational and

media experiences shape students' views on a range of issues, from corruption and poverty to pluralism and digitalization, within the broader fabric of Indonesia's political environment.

This study draws on the metaphor of an ideological maze to explore the increasingly complex nature of student political orientations in the digital age. It refers to a condition in which individuals are no longer able to maintain ideological positions in a linear and stable manner, but instead find themselves lost in a maze of overlapping, contradictory, and frequently shifting attitudes. The emergence of this phenomenon is not without cause: it arises from the collision of two forces between structured formal political education and social media, which floods individuals with fragmented information saturated with algorithmic bias.

As Conway et al. (2016) observe, it is becoming increasingly difficult to form coherent ideological views—especially in a world flooded by information and shaped by rapid socio-political shifts. The reason is simple: it requires high cognitive effort. The more chaotic the situation, the greater the demand for "navigational" ability (Brown 2024), especially for those who, from the outset, do not possess a strong system of values or principles. Shifting between ideological positions is often unpredictable, and most conventional frameworks struggle to make sense of how these transitions actually occur. It is a different matter if such movement is, in fact, another condition—namely, being "lost" in the middle of a maze, as will be examined in this study.

To operationalize this inquiry, we selected UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta as our case site. Despite this limitation, the examination will be carried out by comparing two groups of students: those studying Political Science and those from non-political disciplines. In this way, the study is expected to provide an in-depth picture of how the interaction between formal education and digital exposure simultaneously shapes ideology and political attitudes. Based on the theoretical framework and literature review that have been developed, we formulate four main hypotheses as follows:

Hypothesis 1: *Students who receive formal political education exhibit greater ideological consistency compared to their non-political science counterparts.*

This can be explained, at least theoretically, by the fact that political education provides a clearer foundation for understanding and determining their ideological positions, thereby reducing the likelihood of random ideological shifts (Gong & Zuo 2020, He et al. 2021). We suspect that this occurs because political science students are introduced early on to basic concepts such as democracy, political rights, and ideological theories, which then encourage them not only to absorb knowledge, but also to learn how to place their views within a more coherent framework of thinking.

Hypothesis 2: *Political education increases students' likelihood of adopting liberal ideological orientations due to its emphasis on democratic values and individual rights.*

In addition to shaping more cohesive ideological perspectives, contemporary political education functions to instill the values of democracy, individual freedom, and rationality in politics. These principles are in line with the tenets of liberalism within O'Neill's (2018) framework. This means that students who receive such education should be more inclined to hold liberal ideological orientations compared to other ideological positions (Bailey & Williams 2016).

Hypothesis 3: *Students with liberal ideological orientations are more likely to exhibit liberal political attitudes, advocating for institutional change through reformist approaches.*

Not all political attitudes that support change are radical. In many cases, liberal tendencies are actually reflected in a preference for gradual reform rather than revolution. A liberal orientation presupposes trust in institutions and the belief that change can be achieved through formal and deliberative procedures. On that basis, students with liberal ideological views tend not to be extreme in their political choices, but also not passive. They are more likely to take a critical yet constructive stance—pushing for change, but still within the framework of legal and democratic norms (Ringstad 2014, Yuan 2023).

Hypothesis 4: *Students with moderate ideological diversity tend to have flexible or pragmatic political attitudes, whereas students with low ideological diversity are more likely to exhibit stable or extreme political attitudes.*

Based on research by Bailey & Williams (2016) and Demel et al. (2019), a broader range of ideological perspectives is generally more adaptive in responding to diverse political issues. That is why students with moderate ideological diversity are expected to be more selective and contextual in responding to the political issues presented in this study. Meanwhile, students with low levels of ideological diversity may instead display attitudes that are not only consistent but also closed to change—or conversely, favor radical change—due to a lack of flexibility in their views.

Research Method

To explore how students navigate ideological complexity, this study adopts a descriptive-comparative quantitative design. Conducted at UIN Jakarta between October and November 2024, the research involved 200 undergraduate students—100 from Political Science and 100 from other disciplines. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure gender, semester, and academic diversity in the sample. Given the total student population of around 23,622, we applied Slovin's formula with a 7% margin of error to determine the sample size. While the method is quantitative in nature, the comparative element is key: it enables us to trace how educational background intersects with ideological diversity in the digital age.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N \times e^2}$$
$$n = \frac{23.622}{1 + 23.622 \times 0,07^2}$$

In this study, we used a questionnaire, structured but also adjusted during early stages, and distributed it online through Google Forms—mostly because it's practical and widely used among students here. The questionnaire covered basic information (like age and semester), social media activity, and how often they engage with political content. We referred to O'Neil's (2018) framework to develop the items, focusing on nine political issues that are quite relevant in our context, including corruption, gender, religion, and elections. For each issue, there are two items: one to see how students think ideologically, and one to see their actual attitude toward that issue. That makes 36 items in total, all using a 5-point Likert scale.

A pilot test with 30 students was conducted—not too big, but enough to check whether the questions made sense. The reliability, based on Cronbach's alpha, was acceptable (more than 0.7). Participation was voluntary, and everyone gave their consent. To measure ideological diversity and variation in attitude, we used Simpson's Diversity Index (SDI). We chose this not only because it's statistically sound, but also it gives more nuance than just calculating average scores.

$$D = 1 - \sum \left(\frac{n_i}{N} \right)^2$$

The SDI score was calculated using the proportion of students in each ideological category compared to the total number of respondents (n_i/N). This resulted in values between 0 (meaning no ideological diversity at all) to 1 (indicating maximum diversity). For interpretation, we divided the scores into three levels: low diversity (0.00–0.33), moderate (0.34–0.66), and high (0.67–1.00). This classification helped us see general patterns, but of course, the nuance comes later. After getting the SDI results, we didn't just stop there. They were used alongside several other methods—basic descriptive statistics, some cross-tabs, Chi-square analysis, and linear regression. We didn't use all at once, but depending on what the question required. The goal was to make sense of how the ideological maze works among the students in this study.

Results and Discussion

Before delving into the core analysis of ideological diversity and political attitudes, this section outlines how students—both from Political Science and other disciplines—seek out political information. We begin with a brief profile of respondents, including their gender, semester, age, frequency of political news exposure, and the media platforms they commonly use. This contextual mapping helps clarify the background against which the study's key findings are later interpreted.

Table 1.
Gender, semester, and exposure to political information profile

	Religious Talks, Motivational Sessions, Latest News	Direct Discussion with Friends	Social Media	Traditional Media (TV, Radio, Newspaper)	Online News Sites	TOTAL
Political Science Students						
Gender	**7**	**14**	**56**	**5**	**18**	
Male	5	12	25	3	14	**59**
Female	2	2	31	2	4	**41**
Semester	**7**	**14**	**56**	**5**	**18**	
Semester 3	3	3	21	2	2	**31**
Semester 5	4	5	18	2	5	**34**
Semester 7	0	6	17	1	11	**35**
Non-Political Science Students						
Gender	**14**	**5**	**69**	**8**	**4**	
Male	3	4	21	3	2	**33**
Female	11	1	48	5	2	**67**
Semester	**14**	**5**	**69**	**8**	**4**	
Semester 3	5	0	25	3	0	**33**
Semester 5	4	0	15	3	1	**23**
Semester 7	5	5	29	2	3	**44**

Source: Created by author

Table 2.
Age profile of students and access to political information

Age Group	Google	Instagram	Digital News Platforms	TikTok	Twitter/X	YouTube	TOTAL (Age Group)
Political Science Students							
<18 years	0	12	4	21	0	3	**24**
19 years	1	11	6	15	2	3	**26**
20 years	3	8	11	8	5	11	**27**
>21 years	7	7	11	7	11	8	**23**
TOTAL	**11**	**38**	**32**	**51**	**18**	**25**	
Non-Political Science Students							
<18 years	0	9	0	25	0	1	**35**
19 years	1	7	1	23	0	1	**23**
20 years	1	7	1	23	1	3	**29**
>21 years	0	5	1	16	2	2	**13**
TOTAL	**2**	**28**	**3**	**87**	**3**	**7**	

Notes: Respondents were allowed to select more than one answer.
Source: Created by author

Tables 1 and Table 2 summarize the demographic characteristics and political information access patterns of the respondents. Overall, social media emerged as the dominant source of political information for both political science and non-political science students. Among Political Science students, 56% accessed political information primarily through social media, compared to 69% among non-political science students. Female students exhibited a greater reliance on social media than male students across both academic disciplines.

In terms of academic progression, third-semester students demonstrated the highest reliance on social media, while seventh-semester students showed an increasing tendency to access online news portals. Age also played a role in platform preferences: TikTok was the most popular source among younger students, while older students, particularly those over 21, showed a broader engagement with Twitter/X, digital news platforms, and YouTube.

The first two tables reveal significant preliminary findings: the majority of respondents not only rely on social media to access political information but also show a clear preference for TikTok over other platforms. This pattern is particularly evident among non-political science students, where TikTok's dominance may shift students' cognitive tendencies from constructive and analytical reasoning toward more impulsive thinking. In such cases, truth is often judged based on virality rather than informational validity. Nevertheless, this tendency should not be viewed as inherently negative and warrants further exploration. Political science students, by contrast, demonstrate a more diversified pattern. Although TikTok remains the most commonly used platform, the use of Instagram, digital news portals, and YouTube is also relatively high. This does not necessarily imply superiority over TikTok, but the tendency toward impulsive thinking appears to be weaker when students actively seek information, rather than passively consuming content generated through algorithmic feeds.

Fragmentation or flexibility? Rethinking ideological diversity in the age of social media

The rise of digital technology alongside globalization has transformed the discourse on political education and participation (Khammatova et al. 2021, Li & Kang 2023). Numerous studies support similar claims, highlighting the central role of social media in fostering youth engagement in electoral processes (Juwandi et al. 2019, Prasetyo et al. 2022). However, this section does not merely examine the influence of social media; rather, it compares the intensity of social media use among political science and non-political science students, along with the diversity of their ideological orientations.

Table 3.
Intensity of social media use and ideological diversity among political science students (%)

Duration	<30 Minutes	30-60 Minutes	1-2 Hour	>2 Hour	Total	*P*
Intensity						
<1 Hour	0	0	0	0	0	-
1-2 Hour	4	5	0	1	10	0.749
3-4 Hour	5	19	5	0	29	0.844
>4 Hour	14	27	14	6	61	0.079
Ideological Diversity						
Low **Diversity**	1	8	0	0	9	0.495
Moderate **Diversity**	12	33	9	3	57	0.039
High **Diversity**	10	10	10	4	34	0.102
Total	23	51	19	7	100	0.048

Source: Data obtained through the 2024 survey and analyzed independently using SPSS
(Statistical package for the social sciences)

Contrary to expectations, political science students display greater ideological diversity than their non-political science peers. Based on Simpson's Diversity Index (SDI), 57% fall into the "moderate diversity" category and 34% into "high diversity," reflecting openness to varied ideologies. Crosstab

analysis shows that 33% of political science students who access political news for 30–60 minutes daily exhibit moderate diversity, with a significant association confirmed by $\chi^2(3, N=100) = 8.4$, $p = 0.039$ (Table 3).

In comparison, 67% of non-political science students show moderate diversity, but only 14% demonstrate high diversity (Table 4), suggesting more stable ideological leanings. The Chi-square result ($p = 0.025$) similarly links news exposure to moderate diversity. These findings challenge the notion that political education fosters consistency; rather, exposure to diverse theories and critical discourse fosters ideological flexibility.

Table 4.
Intensity of social media use and ideological diversity among non-political science students (%)

Duration	<30 Minutes	30-60 Minutes	1-2 Hour	>2 Hour	Total	*P*
Intensity						
<1 Hour	1	1	0	0	2	0.157
1-2 Hour	3	7	1	0	11	0.588
3-4 Hour	8	15	2	0	25	0.759
>4 Hour	22	34	4	2	62	0.000
Ideological Diversity						
Low **Diversity**	7	9	1	2	19	0.522
Moderate **Diversity**	22	40	5	0	67	0.025
High **Diversity**	5	8	1	0	14	0.326
Total	34	57	7	2	100	0.001

Source: Data obtained through the 2024 survey and analyzed independently using SPSS
(Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)

Two primary explanations account for this unexpected trend. First, Political Science curricula expose students to diverse ideologies—liberalism, socialism, fascism, communism—and train them to critically evaluate these frameworks. Unlike their non-political science peers, who often adopt beliefs from social or familial influences, these students develop broader, more complex ideological orientations. Second, political science students tend to adopt pragmatic, issue-based stances, drawing selectively from various ideologies based on context rather than ideological purity. This supports research showing that political knowledge fosters tolerance for ideological pluralism rather than reinforcing singular doctrines (Hanson et al. 2012). Thus, political education appears to promote ideological flexibility rather than consistency.

Although social media is a major source of political information, its impact on ideological diversity among political science students appears negligible. A Chi-square test shows no significant correlation ($p > 0.05$) between social media use and ideological consistency. Three factors explain this. First, only 27% of political science students actively consume political news for over 30 minutes daily, with most encountering content incidentally, limiting ideological shifts. In contrast, among non-political science students, the relationship between intensive social media use (>4 hours) and political news access is significant ($p = 0.000$). Second, algorithmic filtering reinforces existing beliefs, encouraging selective interpretation (Ardi & Pradiri 2021). Third, political science students, exposed to structured discourse, are more critical in curating information, making them less prone to ideological shifts from social media exposure.

Regarding ideological diversity, the Simpson Index shows that 19% of non-political science students have low ideological diversity, while only 14% show high diversity. This suggests a greater tendency toward consistent adherence to a single dominant ideology across multiple issues. However, 40% of those spending 30–60 minutes daily on political news fall into the moderate diversity category, with a significant Chi-square result ($p = 0.025$). Although social media is a key channel for political exposure, this exposure is mostly incidental. It raises awareness but rarely deepens understanding or shapes consistent ideology. Political science students exhibit higher diversity due to broader ideological exposure, while non-political science students tend to maintain ideological consistency influenced by social, familial, or curricular factors.

The findings necessitate a reassessment of **Hypothesis 1**, which posited that *students who receive formal political education exhibit greater ideological consistency compared to their non-political science counterparts*. But what the data actually show is a bit different: instead of reinforcing just one ideological stance, political education seems to *broaden* ideological diversity. This isn't entirely surprising, as previous research—like that by Neufeld (2020) or Gupta & Rani (2023)—already indicates that political science courses often help students engage critically with various political ideas, systems, and theoretical frameworks. So, in that sense, education clearly matters. However, these findings also complicate the older assumption that education necessarily leads to ideological uniformity. What seems to be happening is that political education opens up more ideological possibilities—perhaps encouraging students to explore rather than settle too quickly. In that way, it might foster pluralism more than stability.

Mapping ideological trends across academic disciplines

This part looks closely at **Hypothesis 2**, which suggests that students majoring in political science are more likely to develop liberal orientations due to their exposure to political education. The assumption here is not entirely new—quite a few studies have pointed out that political education tends to encourage liberal ways of thinking among university students (Galston 2001, Blasko et al. 2018). One reason behind this is that many contemporary political science curricula put strong emphasis on values like individual freedom, human dignity, and open competition—all of which resonate with liberal thought. Of course, liberalism is not one-dimensional. Other scholars have tried to unpack its complexity (Zepke 2015), while some focus more broadly on how ideological orientations shift along the left–right spectrum (Rosta & Tóth 2021). In short, political education doesn't simply transfer knowledge—it often shapes how students frame political questions, and in many cases, that framing leans toward liberal values.

Table 5.
Ideological diversity among students based on issues (%)

Category /Issue	Anarchism		Liberalism		Social Democracy		Communism		Fascism		P**
	PS*	NPS*	PS	NPS	PS	NPS	PS	NPS	PS	NPS	
Corruption	7	10	2	6	12	22	4	3	27	10	0.004
Poverty	4	9	8	4	5	11	7	16	28	12	0.033
Parties	15	2	5	16	12	18	17	12	2	3	0.001
Elections	17	26	10	9	3	2	4	7	17	6	0.203
Military	17	8	1	1	26	24	0	5	7	13	0.000
Religion	14	9	14	6	12	13	0	6	11	17	0.018
Pluralism	17	11	3	1	6	12	1	6	24	21	0.754
Gender	5	11	2	2	21	20	11	8	13	10	0.003
Digitalization	14	3	6	1	25	35	3	6	3	7	0.026
Average	12	10	5	5	13	17	5	7	15	11	

Source: Data obtained through the 2024 survey and analyzed independently using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)

Contrary to expectations, political science students do not predominantly align with liberalism but exhibit a broader ideological spectrum. Among them, 15% identify with fascism (notably on issues like national security and military intervention), 17% with communism (especially in economic and welfare debates), 13% with social democracy, and only 5% explicitly with liberalism (Table 5). This contradicts the hypothesis that political education fosters a liberal orientation. In contrast, 67% of non-political science students adhere to social democracy, showing a preference for state intervention while upholding democratic principles. Liberal identification remains low at 5%, mirroring the pattern among political science students. Support for fascism (11%) and communism (7%) is also lower among non-political science students, suggesting less exposure to alternative ideologies.

Two factors explain the greater ideological diversity among political science students. First, political education introduces multiple ideological frameworks—liberalism, socialism, communism, fascism—encouraging critical evaluation rather than adherence to a single doctrine. Second, political science students are trained to deconstruct and critique ideologies, fostering adaptability rather than passive ideological adoption (Gong & Zuo 2020). Thus, rather than producing uniform liberal thinkers, political education cultivates intellectual pluralism and a wider ideological range.

In light of these findings, the second hypothesis (H2)—which posits that political education fosters a strong tendency toward liberal ideology—requires critical reconsideration. Although university curricula are indeed designed to introduce and promote engagement with democratic principles, in practice, such exposure does not automatically lead to a fully developed liberal ideological outlook among political science students. While they may accept and support democratic values, they also often express anxiety and disillusionment toward the way democracy is practiced. This opens up space for them to explore alternative explanations and ideological frameworks, including, in some cases, communism or even fascism.

This suggests that liberal values are indeed more likely to be internalized when supported by a social environment that reinforces those values (Galston 2001). Conversely, drawing on the concept of cognitive mobilization, when students are exposed to an ambivalent or even contradictory political reality, they tend to experience ideological dissonance or display more situationally variable orientations depending on the conditions they face (Inglehart 1997).

However, the failure to produce a strong tendency toward liberal ideology does not imply that political education itself has failed. On the contrary, it appears to foster openness and evaluative reasoning based on specific issues. Rather than confirming the assumption that political education necessarily produces liberalism, these findings align with the deliberative education approach, which suggests that political education encourages students to critically explore a range of political perspectives rather than adhere to a singular ideological line (Gutmann & Thompson 2004).

Ideology in action: Tracing its impact on political attitudes

The influence of liberalism on education has significantly shaped how individuals perceive themselves and their socio-political environment (Syaharani 2023) reinforcing the view that political attitudes are often reflective of ideological positions. This section tests the third hypothesis (H3), which posits that students with liberal ideological orientations are more likely to demonstrate liberal political attitudes. While this theoretical assumption aligns with earlier studies emphasizing the role of ideology in shaping political values and preferences (Zaller 1992, Galston 2001) the empirical findings of this study reveal a more intricate dynamic—highlighting not only alignment but also tension and divergence between ideological identity and political behavior.

Survey results (Table 6) show that 33% of political science students identifying as liberals exhibit liberal political attitudes, yet a notable 6% of them maintain conservative positions, favoring status quo preservation. Conversely, 11% of students who identify with communism support liberal reforms, indicating that support for change is not exclusive to liberal ideology. Among non-political science students, ideological inconsistency is also evident: 39% of those identifying with social democracy adopt pragmatic attitudes, and only 7% of liberals exhibit consistently liberal political behavior. These inconsistencies challenge classical models of ideological alignment (Converse 1964) and suggest that political attitudes among youth today are shaped by a complex interplay of ideological cues, institutional contexts, and personal experiences.

Rather than treating ideology as a static predictor of political attitudes, this study finds that students engage with ideology in flexible and context-dependent ways. This aligns with a growing body of research that highlights the decline of ideological coherence and the rise of issue-based preferences among younger generations (Hanson et al. 2012, Dalton 2013, Strother et al. 2021). Instead of adhering to comprehensive ideological frameworks, many students construct their political views around specific salient issues—such as climate change or gender rights—reflecting what Inglehart (1997) terms "cognitive mobilization," wherein increased access to information fosters individualized and critical engagement with political ideas.

The modest R^2 value (6.6%) and regression coefficient (B = 0.257) in this study support the view that ideological identity only partially explains students' political attitudes. This limited explanatory power is particularly evident in the prevalence of pragmatic attitudes across various ideological groups. For instance, students identifying as liberal, social democrat, or even communist do not consistently translate

these labels into uniform policy positions. This finding lends empirical support to Converse's (1964) classic argument that most citizens—including educated youth—lack well-structured belief systems and instead tend to hold "non-attitudes": unstable and unintegrated political opinions.

Table 6.
The relationship and influence of ideology on political attitudes (%)

	Conservative	Liberal	Pragmatic	Radical	Reactionary	TOTAL
Political Science Students						
Anarchism	2	2	2	0	0	6
Fascism	0	2	0	1	0	3
Communism	5	11	6	6	3	31
Liberalism	6	10	6	9	2	33
Social Democracy	4	12	6	4	1	27
Non-Political Science Students						
Anarchism	0	0	1	0	1	2
Fascism	2	3	1	0	1	7
Communism	2	15	8	3	0	28
Liberalism	4	7	10	0	3	24
Social Democracy	4	14	11	3	7	39
R Square	(R) 6.6%		(Adjusted R) 6.22%			
ANOVA	(F) 14.098		Sig. 0.000			
Coefficients	(Constant) 0.511		(B) 0.257	(t) 3.755	(Sig.) 0.000	

Source: Data obtained through the 2024 survey and analyzed independently using SPSS
(Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)

Nevertheless, some scholars view this ideological inconsistency through a more optimistic lens. Rather than interpreting flexibility as confusion or weakness, they argue that it reflects a contextually adaptive response to an ever-changing sociopolitical reality (Zaller 1992, Gutmann & Thompson 2004). On the other hand, high levels of polarization are not necessarily signs of apathy; instead, they may be seen as rational strategies for responding to normative pressures (Mason 2018). Even when such decisions appear irrational, they might stem from the use of heuristics, group identities, or emotional resonance in shaping political preferences (Achen & Bartels 2016).

This opens up another possibility regarding the fragmentation of students' ideological and political attitudes, where exposure to classroom theories and the sociopolitical realities of digital spaces compels students to negotiate conflicting values and norms. As Tolchah (2008) observes, even the ideal tenets of liberalism—such as individual autonomy and reform—often require negotiation with traditional cultural norms and institutional constraints. As a result, students may develop political attitudes that are fragmented yet contextually adaptive. This further reinforces the notion of the ideological maze—a condition in which students are confronted with multiple, overlapping, and often contradictory ideological influences without necessarily arriving at a stable or cohesive political commitment.

As a conclusion, **Hypothesis 3** receives only partial support: students with liberal ideological orientations do tend to exhibit liberal political attitudes, but not consistently, and this relationship does not operate in isolation. It is mediated by various pragmatic considerations, awareness of institutional credibility and conditions, as well as cultural influences that shape the social context in which these students are situated.

Ideological diversity and political attitudes in the digital era

As previously noted, the relationship between ideological coherence and political extremism does not always follow a linear trajectory. In practice, various factors intersect—from social media algorithms that selectively filter exposure to certain content (selective exposure), to classrooms that are increasingly

diverse both socially and ideologically. Such environments tend to foster complex exchanges of perspectives, often marked by cross-cutting messages that complicate the process of consistent ideological internalization.

In this context, students are not only exposed to information that affirms their existing views, but are also compelled to engage with competing and sometimes contradictory narratives. This situation demands a more refined evaluative capacity (Bennett & Iyengar 2008, Tucker et al. 2018). To empirically test this hypothesis, Table 7 presents the distribution of students' ideological diversity levels (low, moderate, high) in relation to their patterns of political attitudes (low, moderate, high). The majority of students (65.5%) fall into the moderate diversity category, and within this group, a significant portion (41%) exhibit pragmatic political attitudes. This supports the assumption that moderate ideological diversity fosters contextual reasoning, as students adjust their stances based on issues rather than rigid ideological adherence. This aligns with the concept of *pluralistic reasoning*, which suggests that individuals exposed to a range of ideological inputs tend to adopt more deliberative and less dogmatic approaches (Stenner 2005, Hutchens et al. 2019).

Table 7.
Ideological diversity and political attitudes of political science students (%)

Ideology/Attitude	Low	Moderate	High	TOTAL
High	2	16	6	24
Moderate	9	41	12	62
Low	4.5	8.5	1	14
TOTAL	15.5	65.5	19	100

Source: Data obtained through the 2024 survey and analyzed independently using SPSS
(Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)

Conversely, students in the low-diversity group (15.5%) do not necessarily gravitate toward extremism. In fact, only a small fraction exhibit radical or reactionary tendencies. These individuals often show signs of what this study terms *reflective stability*—the ability to hold consistent beliefs without rejecting opposing views. This challenges the classical assumption that ideological coherence leads to rigidity and supports recent work by Lodge & Taber (2013), who argue that motivated reasoning can be moderated by social context and deliberative education.

More striking are the findings on the high-diversity group (19%), which reveal both breadth of ideological exposure and inconsistency in political attitudes. Some students in this group endorse contradictory stances—for example, supporting radical economic redistribution while maintaining conservative positions on social norms. Table 8, illustrates these complex pairings, suggesting a phenomenon of *ideological ambivalence* (McGraw & Dolan 2007). Rather than reflecting ideological openness, such patterns reveal a fragmented internal logic, characteristic of what this study conceptualizes as the *ideological maze*—a condition in which individuals synthesize multiple, sometimes incompatible, ideological references without resolving their tensions.

The data reveal a more intricate mediation process shaped by cognitive and contextual factors. Students with low diversity may internalize their beliefs through deliberation and social exposure, while those with high diversity may lack a coherent evaluative framework, resulting in situational stances. This dynamic resonates with Zaller's (1992) model of *accessible considerations* and Mutz's (2002) findings on cross-cutting political exposure, where individuals draw selectively from competing ideological pools. Rather than reflecting ideological confusion, such combinations may emerge from selective appropriation of values across ideological boundaries—a tendency amplified by digital media environments (Iyengar & Hahn 2009).

As a note, although this study was conducted within the academic context of UIN Jakarta, the patterns observed reflect broader trends in the political engagement of Indonesia's younger generation. These findings resonate not only with campus-based observations, but also with discourses occurring in digital communities and informal civic arenas. Based on the data, **Hypothesis 4** receives only partial support.

While students with moderate ideological diversity tend to adopt pragmatic attitudes, those at both ends of the spectrum—low and high diversity—exhibit more complex and situational patterns of political behavior. This suggests that ideological diversity does not follow a linear relationship with political attitudes, but is shaped by a variety of contextual and cognitive factors.

Table 8.
Ideological diversity and political attitudes of political science students (%)

Simpson Index	<0.6	0.6-7.5	>7.5	Total
Political Science Students	o Communism-Conservative (1) o Communism-Liberal (1) o Social Democracy-Pragmatic (1)	o Communism-Liberal (2) o Social Democracy-Pragmatic (1) o Liberalism-Liberal (1) o Liberalism-Reactionary (1)	o Liberalism	9
Non-Political Science Students	o Fascism-Reactionary (1) o Communism-Pragmatic (1) o Social Democracy-Pragmatic (2) o Social Democracy-Liberal (2)	o Communism-Liberal (3) o Social Democracy-Conservative (2) o Social Democracy-Liberal (4) o Social Democracy-Pragmatic (1) o Social Democracy-Reactionary (2)	o Communism	19

Source: Data obtained through the 2024 survey and analyzed independently using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences)

What stands out from these findings is that they challenge the deterministic logic found in classical political theory—the idea that ideological stability automatically leads to rigidity or even extremism. In contrast, the presence of moderate ideological diversity and a pragmatic mindset among many students points to a more pluralistic way of thinking. In this context, a certain level of diversity actually gives them room to explore various political frameworks without being fully tied to any single ideology.

This means the old binary between being "open but confused" versus "coherent but rigid" may no longer apply. Students do not fit neatly into either of these categories. Instead, they seem to be navigating what we might call an ideological maze—selectively drawing on values and narratives, often in fragmented ways, but still adapting them to fit their own situations. Especially in today's digital age, where everything is mixed, fast-moving, and full of cross-cutting influences, political reasoning tends to become less about full ideological commitment and more about responding to specific issues as they come.

Conclusion

This study shows that ideological variation does not follow a linear path between political education, ideological diversity, and political attitudes. The relationship is shaped by a more complex interaction between educational exposure, social situations, and cognitive flexibility. An interesting finding emerges when comparing political science students and non-political science students at UIN Jakarta. Although the former group has broader access to information and a higher level of ideological diversity, this does not automatically lead them to adopt more liberal or consistent political attitudes. Instead, what appears is a fragmentation and flexibility of attitudes, illustrating a condition that can be referred to as an ideological maze.

Although most students fall into the category of moderate ideological diversity and hold pragmatic attitudes, this situation should not be interpreted as ignorance or confusion, but rather as contextual intelligence. They respond to political issues situationally and selectively, not based on a rigid single ideological framework. Political education itself does not appear to shape strong ideological consistency, nor does it automatically produce dominant liberal ideologies and attitudes. On the other hand, ideology

only partially explains political attitudes. There is no linear relationship between diversity and political attitudes. As for the influence of social media, although it is often accused of creating misinformation and polarization, the findings of this study actually show a different effect, where political science students tend to be more resistant to algorithmic bias due to their exposure to systematic discourse, while non-political science students tend to be more unconsciously influenced by the dominance of platforms like TikTok.

In the end, today's students are not "non-ideological," but rather are trapped in a reflective, contextual, and highly negotiated ideological maze. Even if political science students develop more adaptive analytical capacities, it does not necessarily lead to greater ideological coherence or commitment. Further research using longitudinal design and a broader university sample would be very helpful in understanding these dynamics more deeply and in designing educational approaches that can simultaneously promote both ideological depth and breadth of thinking.

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