



The Relationship between Islamic Boarding Schools and Islamic Politics: Democratic Literacy Education for First-Time Voters in West Java

Kunkunrat Kunkunrat¹, Ade Priangani², Willya Achmad³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Pasundan, Bandung, Indonesia

Email: kunkunrat@unpas.ac.id, ade.priangani@unpas.ac.id, willyaachmad@unpas.ac.id

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Abstract

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) are important institutions for shaping students' (*santri*) political knowledge, especially among first-time voters. Democratic literacy is a key component in developing rational, critical, and responsible voters. Nevertheless, this relationship is still viewed in the narrow context of *pesantren* as a political weapon to mobilize an Islamic group, leading to a need for a deeper exploration of *pesantren*'s educational role in democracy. Thus, this study seeks to examine the interplay between *pesantren* and Islamic politics in the context of democratic literacy education for first-time voters in West Java. This study is qualitative in nature and employs a case study method. These findings indicate that *pesantren* influences students' (*santri*) democratic literacy by instilling Islamic moral values, rational and critical political literacy, and *maslabatan*, or an understanding of the public interest. The influence of the *kiai* (Islamic clerics) is normative and ethical, but does not necessarily determine students' political preferences. As first-time voters, students show moderate and inclusive integration of Islamic values with democratic principles. This study shows that *pesantrens* are active contributors to generating first-time voters through democratic awareness, political responsibility, and a quality-of-democracy orientation.

Keywords: Islamic Boarding Schools (*Pesantren*), Islamic Politics, Democratic Literacy, First-Time Voters, Islamic Students.

Abstrak

Pesantren sebagai lembaga pendidikan Islam memiliki peran penting dalam membentuk pengetahuan politik santri, khususnya bagi pemilih pemula. Literasi demokrasi merupakan komponen utama dalam membentuk pemilih yang rasional, kritis, dan bertanggung jawab. Namun demikian, relasi tersebut masih kerap dipahami secara sempit, yakni dalam konteks pesantren sebagai instrumen politik untuk memobilisasi kelompok Islam, sehingga diperlukan kajian yang lebih mendalam mengenai peran edukatif pesantren dalam ranah demokrasi. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji keterkaitan antara pesantren dan politik Islam dalam konteks pendidikan literasi demokrasi bagi pemilih pemula di Jawa Barat. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pesantren berkontribusi dalam membentuk literasi demokrasi santri melalui penanaman nilai-nilai moral Islam, penguatan literasi politik yang rasional dan kritis, serta pemahaman mengenai kemaslabatan dan kepentingan publik. Pengaruh kiai bersifat normatif dan etis, namun tidak secara langsung menentukan preferensi politik santri. Sebagai pemilih pemula, santri menunjukkan integrasi yang moderat dan inklusif antara nilai-nilai Islam dan prinsip-prinsip demokrasi. Penelitian ini membuktikan bahwa pesantren berperan aktif dalam membentuk pemilih pemula yang memiliki kesadaran demokratis, tanggung jawab politik, serta orientasi terhadap kualitas demokrasi.

Kata Kunci: *Pesantren; Politik Islam; Literasi Demokrasi; Pemilih Pemula; Santri.*

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have a strategic position because they act as centers of the traditional knowledge translation of Islamic teaching, and these schools also contribute to the sociopolitical actions on the society that shape the voting decisions of individuals (Arif et al., 2025; N. Azizah et al., 2025; Baihaqi et al., 2023; Bruinessen, 1995; Fatah et al., 2025; Huda, 2024; Roqib, 2021), Islamic boarding schools are important actors in contemporary political contexts where religion–state relations continue to shape political participation and communication practices among students (Cibro et al., 2023; Hamonangan et al., 2024). First-time voters are often vulnerable in these settings due to the tension between traditional obedience to the kiai's authority and the demands of being informed digital-age citizens, filled with disinformation (Rohmansyah et al., 2022; Siswanto et al., 2022). Without sufficient democratic literacy education, the initial political participation of first-time voters in Islamic boarding schools may find themselves entrenched in procedural vote mobilization without a comprehensive notion of the deep values of democracy (Arif et al., 2022; Syamsuadi et al., 2025).

Democratic literacy education in Islamic boarding schools is generally not delivered in the form of formal political education, but is integrated into various religious and social activities (Falah & Nuh, 2025; Pradipta et al., 2025). Lectures by the kiai (the leader of an Islamic boarding school) are given mainly to convey real democratic values like deliberation, justice, and trustworthiness by leaders, and the moral responsibility of election of leaders as a way of ensuring that meaningful democratic values are transmitted by the kiai (Aisyah et al., 2025; Hamdanah et al., 2025; Ma'arif et al., 2025; Nadya, 2021). Democratic literacy is not only instilled in lectures but also embedded in daily practices in Islamic boarding schools, such as decision-making through a habituation of deliberation in class discussion forums, thematic Islamic studies focusing on national issues, and the kiai's ideal attitude toward governance with moderation and wisdom (Hefner, 2023; Madkan et al., 2025; Margiansyah et al., 2025). This educational model renders Islamic boarding schools contextually embedded, ethical and relevant places to learn about democracy to first-time voters (Afizah, 2023; Primajati et al., 2024).

The interaction of the *pesantren* and the Islamic political life reveals a complex and mutual relationship along with the theological values that are formed not only on the religious orientation but how the social and the political orientation of such schools can frame the *pesantren* community (Fakhrurrazi et al., 2021; Pratama et al., 2024). This issue becomes even more serious in the case of a region like West Java, where there are large numbers of *pesantren* and the citizenry is religious and politically active. Against this background, the *pesantren* are regarded to serve not only as centers of religious instruction but also as arenas for inculcating in values for example that associated with democracy and citizenship in society. Therefore, strengthening democratic literacy for Islamic boarding school students (*santri*) who are considered first-time voters is important to ensure that their religious understanding is in line with democratic principles and does not become trapped in a dichotomous understanding between religion and politics (Amrullah, 2025; Halomoan et al., 2023; Hariadi et al., 2024; Kardi et al., 2023; Masuwd et al., 2025; Nasution et al., 2024). Democratic literacy in *pesantren* settings should facilitate a transformation in students consciousness from the passive spiritual attention to the critical, rationality, and citizenship of citizens and give them the ability to understand that political involvement is a part of their quest to benefit the common good (Mujahid, 2021; Sofi et al., 2025).

This research is even more important because the literature gaps in previous studies, suggesting an unresolved dynamic regarding the political position of Indonesian students of Islamic boarding schools (*santri*), highlights the gap. (Madani & Marijan, 2021) points out that political orientation in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) is still predominantly dominated by the figure of the kiai as the main patron, but has thus far provided no insights into how first-time voters respond to this in an age of open information. Another study by (Gaspersz et al., 2024) on Islamic populism demonstrates that young Muslim voters are often implicated in identity politics,

reinforcing the need for democratic literacy to enable political orientation, rather than just religious sentiment. The research conducted by (Urgenadila, 2025) finds that voter education in Islamic boarding schools is frequently ceremonial and top-down, not encouraging critical reasoning skills in students to judge religious instruction versus individual political activity. The research of (Arif et al., 2024; Jubba et al., 2022; Miftahuddin et al., 2024) finds that although young Islamic boarding school students have shifted towards the use of social media, their political references remain limited to a homogeneous internal circle, which threatens creating a political echo chamber.

However, this study does not specifically offer an integrative democratic literacy education model for first-time voters in Islamic boarding school students (*santri*). Five distinct studies lay the foundation for recognizing the need to develop a model of first-time voters for Islamic boarding school participants in the area to ensure there is logical cointegration between Islamic and democratic values. Hence, this study has very strong relevance in this area. Building on previous scholarship, this study aims to systematically map how an educational model for democratic literacy can be integrated into the design of the relationship between Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and Islamic politics without compromising the authority of the kiai (Islamic cleric). It seeks to fill the void in these previous studies by providing a novel perspective on improving the critical decision-making capacity of first-time voters by applying a digital literacy and citizenship approach in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), as the vast majority of previous research has either quantitated voting behavior or focused on the problem of patronage. The objective of this research is to demonstrate the capacity of first-time voters (*santri*) to become autonomous rational political agents if adequately allowed an ample literacy space in society. It also examines the hypothesis that the ties between Islamic boarding schools and Islamic politics do not have to be always one-way mobilization, but can become a dialectic to promote the quality of democracy.

METHOD

The research conducted here adopted a qualitative methodology using a case study approach and was carried out in a series of systematic stages aimed at fully understanding the reality of democratic literacy in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in depth. Data collection involved participatory observation in the Garut and Tasikmalaya Regencies in West Java Province, which were both traditional and modern, as typologies to observe the daily interactions of kiai (Islamic clerics), *ustadz* (Islamic teachers), and *santri* (students) interacting with Islamic political narratives. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including *pesantren* caretakers as moral authorities and *santri* (first-time voters), to investigate their understanding of democratic rights. Additionally, civic education curricula and religious teaching materials (classical Islamic texts) often include *siyasah* (Islamic political values), and documentation was made on these materials and their relationship with rational and critical voter education.

A careful analysis using the case study method was undertaken because it is important given the complexity of the phenomenon of Islamic boarding schools and politics, which cannot be separated from their social environment and will be addressed using the current method of study. Using Creswell's framework, case studies allow scholars to more clearly investigate a narrow, specific case (bounded system) of democratic literacy among first-time voters in a region with unique political features like West Java. This method allows researchers to explore why the patronage system surrounding the kiai persists and "how" democratic literacy can be embedded into Islamic political narratives without theological resistance (Creswell et al., 2021). Such relevance is important to understand the social and cultural dynamics that influence the political behavior of Islamic boarding school students, which quantitative survey approaches would find impossible to capture or a single narrative study cannot be based on individual behavior.

In this study, data was analyzed through the process of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (White & Cooper, 2022), which enabled researchers to create specific findings about the complexities of information on political interactions among Islamic boarding schools. This analysis was performed methodically, rigorously, and with high validity to ensure that

interpretations of Islamic political narratives and the responses of Islamic boarding school students (*santri*) as new voters were objective and credible (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021). This strategy is especially pertinent to the current study, as a qualitative piece that seeks to explore how democratic literacy education is incorporated into Islamic boarding schools in an effort to promote civic vigilance without compromising Islamic ideals. Thanks to this scheme, researchers could identify the dynamics of power relations, the transformations of political knowledge that Islamic boarding school students have undergone, and the effective role of democratic literacy in determining rational voting behavior in the current political context of West Java.

RESULT

Islamic Boarding Schools as Spaces for Political Socialization of Students

With this in mind, Islamic boarding schools play a key role as zones of political socialization, shaping students' character, morals, and national awareness through religious education which is integrated into social and national values. This education is not aimed at practical politics, rather it helps students recognize that moral responsibility and morality form an essential part of any participation in politics. Students are brought up in religious institutions where they receive religious study, are taught to understand the value of prayerful learning and the good example of other members of their community (*kiai*) who practice Islam by religious sermons, and they understand that it is part of their religious mandate to be involved on a national level. One of the Islamic boarding school's administrators from Tasikmalaya (P1) echoed this and said that *"The morals of students are the first. They will be strong in morals, and once they have that strong morals, their political views will be based on the values of betterment and justice"* (Interview, 2025).

The findings suggest that traditional Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in West Java provide special opportunities for shaping political consciousness, especially for first-time voters. Unlike formal school civics education as structural, curricular, while providing an ideal context to promote and process political socialization, Islamic boarding schools conduct this political socialization from both a cultural and religious perspective. Islamic boarding schools adopt a holistic educational approach by integrating Islamic values, ethics, and leadership training, ethics and leadership that will shape social and moral characteristics of each student.

Political understanding is not taught as a standalone subject: They are internalized by studies in religion and classes offered by Islamic scholars, and are enacted within the daily routine of Islamic school life. And thus, S1 one final year student declared that, *"We didn't learn politics in particular but we were told on the part of the kiai that to pick a leader is to be part of our responsibility as Muslims and citizens"* (Interview, 2025).

Furthermore, Islamic boarding schools are often informal environments in which students learn about social and political dynamics through on its premises within a system - student discussions, national seminars and forums for student organization deliberation. Such activities represent context-sensitive ways of learning democracy itself, which teach students how to state their opinions, hear competing views, and act collectively. Religious instructive leader was known to foster student organizations, U1 said that, *"This conversation is vital so that students don't only follow along but begin to learn to understand what led to the choice"* (Interview, 2025).

Still, practical political education in Islamic boarding schools is quite limited. Most students receive little to no training in the electoral structure, in formal modes of political organization, and in the rational estimation of a candidate's vision, mission and track record. And this has the effect of rendering students' political acts normative and symbolic. In fact, only one first-time voter reported, (S2) *"We know we have to select a trustworthy leader but we don't really know how to evaluate a candidate's program or track record"* (Interview, 2025).

Drawing on interviews and observations, the process of political socialization in Islamic boarding schools is conducted via a comprehensive course program with the incorporation of Islamic morality and leadership into the educational philosophy of its students. This is an education that is not only about mastering the religious knowledge, but also about forming social and moral

character in students as they are forming an identity of civic. Students are cultivated via holy books, lectures of the kiai (Islamic scholars), as well as daily morals instilled in life — justice, trustworthiness, responsibility and social concern are some of them. As said by (P1), who declared that: *“Pesantren doesn’t teach practical politics, but rather impart ethics of honesty, trustworthiness and responsibility. These values are important for students when they transition into society, including politics”* (Interview, 2025).

The statement illustrates that the process of political socialization in Islamic boarding schools is indirectly performed by internalization of the more basic values directly related to the life of democracy. The crucial role of kiai (Islamic scholars) in political socialization is that they have moral authority and thus high legitimacy in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), so they must always work for them. Kiai are expected to work not just as teachers, but as models that influence the students perspectives and attitudes towards different topics, including politics. Through religious studies and counseling, kiai teach their students to consider the merits and drawbacks of all things, as well as develop the principles of deliberation, justice and social responsibility. (S2), a final year student in an Islamic boarding school in Garut, stated this: *“The kiai would always say that politics should be pursued, with good motives and for the good of the people and not for personal good. And from there we know that politics is a duty.”* (Interview, 2025).

Consequently, the kiai functions at least as an agent of value transmission and also as an agent of political socialization who norms and shapes the political awareness of the students. Along with the kiai also, internal *pesantren* activities, including discussions, and seminars, as well as social activities and other social participation, are essential instruments in the political socialization of students.

Conversations are an outlet for students to express their opinion and discuss the students’ views, share ideas and view different social and national issues. At the same time, social activities are providing students with tangible experience to learn about the workings of society, firsthand. As explained by (S3) who is a student: *“In discussion tasks, we learn to speak up and learn the different social issues. These activities help us to get insights on social conditions”* (Interview, 2025).

The alumni of Islamic boarding schools are involved in politics as another form of political socialization to students. Alumni members in politics are a tangible example of political involvement of Islamic boarding school graduates. B

y being part of the activities of various Islamic boarding schools, the participation of their alumni gives them both incentive and references for students to know what it takes to make the most of their political roles. As mentioned by (U2) (an alumnus of an Islamic boarding school), stated:

“These principles of honesty and responsibility that I learnt at the Islamic boarding school are now essential provisions in executing my place in the society, a.k.a. politics”. Furthermore, when we see our alumni who have successfully made a contribution to society, they serve as an incentive for us, and are a reminder that students are part of social and political life as well” (Interview, 2025).

Consequently, alumni become social referents who further the political socialization process of a student but with great influences as well; they affect his political aspirations.

The Authority of the Kiai and the Formation of the Political Attitudes of the *Santri*

The kiai has a privileged place within the social structure of Islamic boarding schools; he has maximum moral and spiritual authority. In its pedagogical functions, the kiai is neither merely a teacher of religious knowledge, nor merely a guardian of normative values, but rather an interpreter of Islamic teachings into everyday life. By his acute knowledge of this discipline, the kiai is rightful in establishing and guiding the lines of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, as well as addressing issues on a local and national scale.

In such kind of environment, the *kiai* becomes the central ethical framework to students, and hence, their moral judgements and attitudes carry a good amount of moral power in determining how the students orient thoughts and actions. As one of the *kiai* at the Islamic boarding school (K1) said,

"Santri learn not only the scriptures, but also attitudes to life. It is not uncommon for them to look to the views of the kiai first when there is a social or national issue, as this is perceived as an aspect of religious guidance" (Interview, 2025).

As we can see, the legitimacy of a *kiai* also transcends knowledge; it builds up from best behaviours to a close, emotional-spiritual relationship with the students. It is in the *pesantren* where these exchanges unfold that the informal connection forged between the school and *kiai* serves as a model not only for authoritative authority, but one built on personal esteem and faith.

This relationship makes it so that the *kiai*'s advice and views are recognized as guides, not as instructions. A first-time student voter (S4) said,

"We trust this *kiai* because not only does he teach but he is also his direct example. So when he speaks of leadership or politics we assume it to be considered, deliberately so, that it's for the greater good (Interview, 2025)."

However, *kiai* have wide-ranging effects within students' lives including determining their view of politics, leadership and the rights to participate as citizens framed as part of moral and spiritual responsibility.



Figure 1. One form of political activity through lectures and discussions at one of the Islamic boarding schools in Garut

The association between the *kiai* and the students is grounded in the solid values of respect, obedience, as well as the principle of *sami'na wa atbo'na*, that are deeply inherited from the *pesantren* tradition. These principles not only dictate pedagogical interactions, but also influence hierarchical and paternalistic ways of social interaction. Students are trained to regard a *kiai* as a source of knowledge and blessings and the *kiai*'s advice and opinions are considered acceptable, with little discussion. It is here that obedience is not looked at as a compulsion but rather a kind of spiritual awakening that is said to deliver goodness in this world and the hereafter.

This pattern of relationship also accounts for the reason that political views of the political scholars (*kiai*) are used as the central point of reference of Islamic students (*santri*) regarding political events like the elections. Politically selected students do not always act solely on rational considerations related to evaluating a candidate's vision, mission, or program, as such, they also often engage with each campaign for symbolic and spiritual loyalty to the *kiai* as a role model. The *kiai* is seen as having moral wisdom and the capability to ascertain which political options are more

advantageous. Students' political attitudes, therefore, are assumed as representative of the kiai's political power and vote decisions are viewed as an indication of obedience and belief in the moral principles imparted (not as an individual political will).

The kiai are authoritative, and it has a tangible shape when it comes to how elections take place, based on modes of communication and symbols that the students think of as political allusions. The kiai's political views aren't always articulated in the form of direct calls to vote for a particular candidate; their voices, however, are often packaged in religious sermons, public religious studies or moral advice on the traits required for ideal leadership from an Islamic perspective. Students see these indicators as normative guides for political decision-making. P2 explained (a *pesantren* administrator).

“The kiai barely references candidates explicitly to name them by name. But generally, he lays out the traits of a leader who is trustworthy, honest, and on the people's side. The students then self-determine whom they believe suits the criteria of the candidate best” (Interview, 2025).

Also, kiai see politics not only as an area in warfare for power, but a matter of social worship - and a matter which they have to bear morally accountable as well as spiritually. In their sermons kiai often emphasize that selecting a leader is an ethical imperative and carries with it far-reaching implications for the public good. So once again, one kiai said (K2). *“Voting isn't about like or dislike, but about responsibility before God. Students must understand that their vote can bring good or bad”* (interview, 2025).

By framing the voters in this way, the students come to realize that taking part in politics in schools is not a practical matter, but that participating is a choice with moral meaning. This perspective shows that the role of kiai for electoral politics is not just about mobilizing votes but also educating voters and normatively interpreting what they think they should see.

By ethics framing this kind of experience students are invited to understand politics as a field of service and caring, rather than one merely where the flow can be followed at the expense of people but also environment. One student (S3) explained, *“We were never forced to vote. But after hearing the kiai's explanation about trust and leadership, we felt more cautious and thoughtful before voting”* (Interview, 2025).

Therefore, the authority of the kiai serves as both the basis of the directions of political preferences, as well as a mediator in determining the political consciousness of students based on values involving ethics and religiosity, not just of students' political beliefs.

This study demonstrates a watershed innovation in the relations between kiai (Islamic scholars) and *santri* (Islamic students) regarding electoral politics. Compared with previous research, which tended to frame *santri* as passive agents of political alignment with and following the kiai's political tastes, our research reveals a shift to one in which they have a dialogical and informative relationship. The kiai isn't a fixed figure in dictating the students' political decisions anymore, but a moral educator that trains them in core values such as justice, integrity, and responsibility before they begin school in politics. *Santri* are encouraged through a normative and ethical approach to approach the evaluation of political choices on the basis of public welfare and not just personal proximity or symbolic proximity. This shows the transformation of the kiai's role from a source of political legitimacy to a democratic literacy education based on Islamic values.

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as much serve as contexts of learning about democracy as they are reproduce a political elite's preferences. Students find kiai (Islamic cleric) a significant point of inspiration in moral conduct and spirituality, but the *Santri* are not only influenced by traditional kiai-*santri*, but political attitudes. These attitudes are acquired from more nuanced encounters such as those that take place through education opportunities and democratic values in a context of digital media or discussion forums. It has produced a more flexible picture of political attitudes with respect for the kiai as a role model of respect and as opposed to just following the letter of the law, students with increasingly developed critical consciousness and moral views on political issues. Islamic boarding schools thus have strategic potential to develop

first-time voters not only grounded in moral and religious values, but also able to reflect and adapt to modern democratic life.

Democracy Literacy Education for First-Time Voters

Islamic boarding schools are fundamental to democratic literacy education by internalising Islamic values that substantially embody democratic values. Moral and political ideals of deliberation, justice, integrity and well-being are introduced to religious education and examined within an institutional setting and social and national settings. Religious concepts of deliberation, justice, trust and welfare are not only taught as ideas, but not only “regardless of the context” but as norms, as normative themes of society and national identity and life. Students learn about Islamic values such as: collective choice, justice at the heart of leadership, and what a leader should do to the others is the morality of a community through the study of religious studies and Islamic texts. We also consider the ethical grounding these values make up, informing students the ways in which they approach the democracy itself, and in particular the ways in which they think about political rights and obligations as being part and parcel of worship.

Many approaches can be used when designing democratic literacy education within Islamic boarding schools. One of the key methods was curriculum integration, based on extensive interviews and observations. Democratic literacy is not explicitly taught as a subject but is built into other subjects, such as Civics (PKn) and Islamic Religious Education. In PKn the students learn about the rights and duties of citizens along with the democratic structure and the general election process. In Islamic Religious Education students have values such as deliberation, justice, trust, and responsible leadership related to national and state life. (U3), a teacher, made this point of view clear: *“In our classes, we tie civics content to Islamic values, like deliberation and justice, for electing leaders. That way, students interpret democracy not just theoretically but also from an Islamic standpoint”* (Interview, 2025).

Such an integration helps students grasp democracy in its fullness, within normative Islamic constructs as well as the model of modern-day citizenship. Democratic literacy is also reinforced by extracurricular and organizational activities throughout Islamic boarding schools. The classroom, community meetings, and other institutions of governance are concrete opportunities to exercise democracy. Activities like these enable students to participate in group or collaborative discussion-building with others and to hold one another to an opinion, honour disagreements, and arrive to informed decisions. As stated by (P3), he stated: *“We provide space for students to participate in organizations and discussions. From there, they learn how to express their opinions, accept differences, and make decisions together”* (Interview, 2025).

These insights suggest the significance of curriculum and organizational practice integration in Islamic boarding schools in the context and sustainability of shaping the democratic literacy of students, whilst not discarding the unique features of the value based Islamic boarding schools education.

Another method widely acknowledged as an effective approach for democratic literacy education in Islamic boarding schools is interactive educational systems that frame students as subjects rather than passive recipients of learning opportunities. This technique is made operational and is considered a common practice in the Islamic boarding schools, especially when it comes to learning activities as well as in the student organization's life. Through deliberation, students learn to speak their mind, hear other students' points of view, and decide with others on a group level. As told by Informant (S3), a student, who said:

“We usually have some discussions about some activities in Islamic boarding schools. Then we learn to voice our opinions and respect the diverse opinions of our peers” (Interview, 2025).

According to (P1) as the caretaker of the Islamic boarding school who stated that:

“At Islamic boarding schools, deliberation has become a custom. We invite students to discussion for them to adopt an open minded attitude and prevent imposing their ideas” (Interview, 2025).

It is indicated that interactive learning via deliberation facilitates that approaches from these two results can create dialogical, participatory, and tolerant mindsets which reflect democratic norms. Second one is to use student groups as active bases for learning democracy. They offer an opportunity for student hands-on application of leadership, active learning and decision-making in a hands-on environment.

In selecting administrators and shaping work programs and evaluating the activities, students get embedded in a real world democracy practice. As one (S2), a student wrote: *"We elect the leader of the organization democratically; everybody has the equal right to vote. From this we were able to see how the democratic process really works"* (Interview, 2025).

Informant 4 (P2), as an administrator of the boarding school also said the same thing, indicating that: *"The student organization is a means of learning leadership and responsibility, so that students have direct experience in carrying out the democratic process"* (Interview, 2025).

Therefore, the *santri* structure serves as an arena for the usage of democratic education. The other critical method was to enhance students' digital media literacy, because political information dissemination especially in a digital environment is growing. Islamic boarding schools seek to prepare students to be able to filter and understand information critically so that they cannot be easily swayed by misinformation. According to Informant(U3), a teacher in the study:

"We advise students against taking information in social media at face value in the moment but to fact-check the accuracy of what they are reading at first. It is therefore critical that students possess digital literacy skills to avoid being easily swayed by misleading political information, which occurs in the run-up to an election. In addition, students are instructed to be more cautious in their uptake of information and not to readily disseminate information about which credibility is insecure" (Interview, 2025).

This indicates that students require a digital media skills acquisition that will contribute to critical and responsible political awareness.

Discussion

Transformation of the Role of Kiai in Democratic Literacy Education for *Santri*

The findings suggest that the function of the kiai as a force in democratic literacy education in Islamic boarding schools shifted from a deterministic to an educative, reflective, and dialogical role. Historically, kiai have been portrayed as authoritative figures, having had a major bearing on the political desires of students (*santri*). Accordingly, pupils' choice of courses of politics was more likely to be dictated or influenced by kiai and students' choices were more motivated by the direction or the will of the kiai as loyalty to and obedience to religious authority (Achmadin et al., 2024; Basri & Hill, 2020).

But now at present their function is no longer translated into direct political direction, but through a process of values education which aims to help develop the moral awareness and moral responsibility. Kiai are more active moral educators, who teach political ethics like *al-'adl* – justice, honesty, trustworthiness, and responsibility of citizenry in such a way that students become normatively enabled to understand or respond wisely towards political dynamics. This evolution reveals a transition from patron-client relationships rooted in a hierarchical pattern to a relationship of participational educational processes organized around internalization of values between kiai and *santri*. In this emerging model, kiai no longer directly determine students' political preferences and direction of *santri's* political choices; kiai are simply facilitators in the process of creating critical and rational democratic literacy. The implication of this change lies in the development of democracy as *pesantren* not only are places of religious instruction, but also educational spaces that facilitate a democratic education process among *santri* that inspires them to actively and consciously acknowledge their political rights and responsibilities.

The table below shows the comparison of kiai role transformation in the democratic literacy education:

Table 1. Comparison of the Role of Kiai in Democratic Literacy Education for Santri

Aspect	The Role of Kiai in the Past	The Role of Kiai Today
Role Orientation	Kiai plays a role as the main authoritative figure who is the sole reference in various aspects of life, including political choices.	The Kiai remains a central figure, but plays a greater role as a guide and facilitator in building the political awareness of the students.
Political Education Pattern	Doctrinal and normative in nature, with an emphasis on compliance with the kiai's directives	More dialogical and educational, by providing space for discussion and rational consideration to students
Attitudes towards the Political Choices of Islamic Students	Tends to provide direct or implicit direction regarding particular political preferences	More emphasis on freedom of choice and individual responsibility in determining political choices
Democracy Literacy Material	Limited to leadership values from a religious perspective	Covers modern democratic values such as political participation, voting rights, civic responsibility, and democratic ethics.
Sources of Political Information	Dominated by the views of the kiai and the <i>pesantren</i> environment	More open to a variety of sources, including digital media, public discussion, and civic education
Communication Patterns	One-way (top-down)	Two-way (dialogical) and participatory
The Goals of Political Education	Maintaining the loyalty of students to the values and authority of the Islamic boarding school	Developing critical awareness, rationality, and political independence of students
The Position of Kiai in Practical Politics	Some kiai are actively involved in the political mobilization of <i>santri</i>	Kiai tend to maintain their position as moral educators and do not directly mobilize the political choices of students.
Level of Student Independence	Relatively low, students tend to follow the direction of the kiai	Higher, students have autonomy in determining political choices.
Focus on Democratic Values	Emphasis on compliance and loyalty	Emphasis on conscious participation, responsibility, and political rationality

Source: Processed by Researchers 2025

According to the comparative table of the role of kiai in student democratic literacy education, we see a large change of authority, school direction and political orientation in an Islamic boarding school in West Java. In the past, the kiai were portrayed as a centralizing and deterministic figure who was the one who not only gave moral legitimacy, but which also directly and subtly affected and even controlled the political decisions of students. The relationship developed was thus more in line with the patron-client relationship, where students' compliance with the kiai emerged as the dominant factor in forming political attitudes. So that political literacy is not something that people were being critical students of, but something that was being propagated through the passing on of values of loyalty and trust in the kiai's authority as spiritual and social leader (Adeoye et al., 2025; H. N. Azizah et al., 2023; Paisun et al., 2025; Rofiq, 2025; Yuliana et al., 2025).

Yet with recent democratic progress and greater access to information, the kiai position has become more educationally or dialogically oriented. Kiai are no longer actors who direct political choice, they are teachers, imparting ethical political values such as justice, trustworthiness, responsibility and deliberation to students from Islamic sources (Greimel et al., 2023). So democratic literacy education at Islamic boarding schools is geared more towards how you internalize those values than how to develop political preferences that will work practically. So,

students learn to see politics as a civic obligation that needs to be executed consciously, rationally, and according to the moral framework.

The methods of indoctrination are also changing, gradually becoming participatory. Kiai (Islamic scholars) are starting to form dialogic debate and discussion spaces for pupils to share their opinions, question, and to construct their own political opinions (Nugroho et al., 2025). It shows that Islamic boarding schools are no longer only a site to reproduce the political preference of religious elites, but rather a context for democratic learning. This technique enhances students' capacity for analytic thought while not diluting the ethos of deference to authority and Islamic boarding school traditions.

The stakes for this shift are significant when it comes to nurturing democracy — and shaping the first-time voters in a way that reflects their values. As an Islamic boarding school (*santri*), *santri* are no longer considered objects of political mobilization, but rather political subjects who are endowed with the authority to deliberate or not to deliberate on their life choices. It will be obvious that the role of the kiai (Islamic cleric) still is strategic, but it is more in moral development and values-based democratic education. This shift highlights the enormous potential of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as educational enterprises that can act as a bridge to Islamic values and modern democratic political culture by fostering a more ethical, reasonable and ordinary political culture.

The Dynamics of the Relationship between Islamic Boarding Schools and Islamic Politics in the Formation of Political Preferences of First-Time Voters

The relationship of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and Islamic politics has considerable impact on the political preference formation among first-time voters, but the influence, of no direct deterministic nature, does not explicitly direct students on the political decision and their choice. *Pesantren* serve as social and educational spaces that shape students' thinking in relation to the nexus of religious values and political life (Halimah et al., 2024; Suwendi et al., 2024). The lessons of Islam, such as justice, trustworthiness, responsibility, and community service, provided as a normative basis inform students' judgments about leaders and the developing polity that is being developed.

Through this lens, students cannot be divorced from a wider history as a reflection of their role in public policy making and public policy making of sharia for the public good. This orientation suggests that student politics is driven more by ethics and moralistic rather than simply pragmatic priorities for political education, which makes political participation in life less a pragmatic or a mere expedient pursuit. In this regard, political education and discourse in the Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) institutions is an important tool to bring forward and strengthen students' firsts (*santri*) political consciousness as first-generation voters (Abidin & Sirojuddin, 2024).

A series of learning opportunities – including thematic discussions, seminars, *babtsul masail* (religious discussion) and book studies – have been developed to include theological, in addition to social matters and issues concerning the country and the world. In doing so, the students experience various ideas of leadership, fairness, contemplation and social responsibility with a Muslim and civil sensibility. This is the goal of this approach which is to mold the character of a student who has a full spiritual base as well as the right political knowledge to understand the significance of taking part in a democratic system. *Santri* politics is grounded in the adoption of Islamic virtues such as trust, fairness, truthfulness, and accountability. It places political behavior not only in a position to attain power, but also as a ritual (*wasilah*) activity that serves the well-being of a community.

From this standpoint power is regarded as a trust that must be morally and spiritually taken into account, and that every political act needs to be directed to the public interest and to justice principles, not to personal or group interests. This concept is the part of Islamic boarding school education that teaches leadership becomes service (*khidmah*) for society; it requires uprightness,

candour, and adherence to ethical behavior. Therefore, politics as a field of *santri* is not perceived as being devoid of values, politically as there is a religious and social duty to develop an ethical and socially just nation. It also contributes to *santri's* claim as political players who have participatory sensitivity, but also good ethical underpinnings for acting as community members.

In shaping your political views, students' opinions may not be completely free about to become and they are not entirely outside of the influence and obedience of the *kiai* as the main authority figure in the *pesantren* environment. The *kiai* is placed as not just a religiosity educator but also the moral leader and the ideal role model with cultural and spiritual legitimacy in an extremely close relationship with its audience and, as such, his political ideas and ideology are frequently drawn to by the students. This obedience is created when the *pesantren* values, in this case an emphasis of manners, regard, trust in the *kiai*, are internalized, with the ensuing consequences for the students' propensity to respond to political direction or signals.

Because of this condition, the *pesantren* play a strategic role in the electoral context as a base for the political influence in the area where the students' collective political preferences can be formed through the symbolic and normative influence of the *kiai*. However, this effect does not necessarily apply directly to the teaching-of-society but rather to transmission of values, the guidelines of ideal leadership and moral thought, which gradually influences (indirectly) the students on his or her political orientation, so that *kiai* conformity remains in an interpenetration with the student process of logical consideration in action.

However, the dynamic relation of Islamic boarding schools to Islamic politics also shows the role of *santri* (Islamic students) as change agents and strategists of social and political life. *Santri* serve not only as objects of education but also as active subjects in overseeing the direction of public policy to ensure it remains aligned with Islamic principles and social justice. Trained with a firm moral and spiritual base, *santri* have the ability to criticize laws that have been shown to be harmful to society and reject political ideology such that one may not fit the needs of the society. *Santri* also serve as a channel for communication between the community and government. It helps to put to policymakers in a constructive manner the needs, aspirations and problems that the community has.

It also shows, therefore, that *santri* is not only a function in relation to religious da'wah, but in contributing positively to the quality of democracy. As engaged members grounded firmly in their collective belief system, they uphold ethical values and have a strong social conscience. And it is evident that between Islamic boarding schools and Islamic politics in a democracy context is complex, dynamic, transformative one. Islamic boarding schools do more than serve as instruments of political development it influences the political inclinations of students directly but as part of educational establishment that develop political consciousness for Islamic values, ethical behavior, and social responsibilities. Islamic boarding schools introduce such values as justice, trustworthiness, deliberation and concern for public interest through the educational process, the actions of the exemplary one that a *kiai*, of an Islamic scholar and thus through various formal and cultural learning activities, which provide basic building blocks of the formation of students' political orientation (Cahyani et al., 2026; Hasanah & Husna, 2025). This case indicates that Islamic boarding schools strategically help democratization, in particular preparing them for them to be first-time voters with moral loyalty, rational, critical consideration and reflective awareness of political issues (Cahyani et al., 2026; Fatah et al., 2025; Jaedun et al., 2024; Jubba et al., 2022; Mufrihah et al., 2025). Therefore, Islamic boarding schools provide an opportunity for democratic education that does not just reflect religious education, but actively and responsibly develop a generation of citizens involved in political life with a positive moral value, contributing to enhancing the democratic quality in Indonesia.

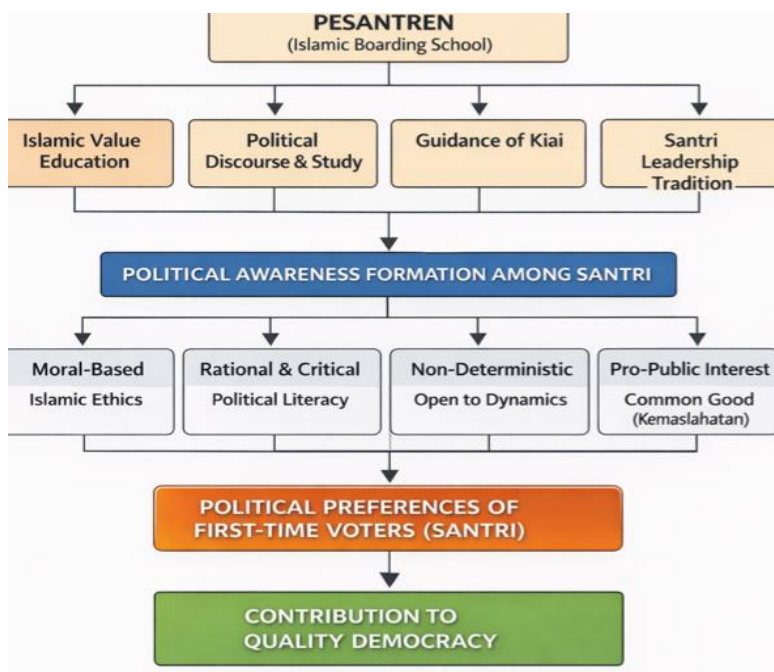


Figure 2. The relationship between Islamic boarding schools and Islamic politics in the formation of political preferences of first-time voters

The shift in the role of Islamic boarding school students (*santri*) from mere passive objects of electoral mobilization to autonomous political agents can be sharply analyzed through Constructivist Theory in International Relations. Constructivism emphasizes that actors' identities and interests are not fixed (given), but rather constructed through social interactions, ideas, and culture. When Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) changed their political education patterns to become more interactive and dialogical, the identity of Islamic boarding school students as first-time voters was deconstructed and rebuilt. They no longer viewed their right to vote as a mere manifestation of symbolic-doctrinal obedience, but rather as a rational civic responsibility.

This identity transformation directly altered the structure of electoral interests in Indonesia's largest vote bank. From a constructivist perspective, as the critical awareness of Islamic boarding school students increased, these agents began to influence the political structures around them. Political elites could no longer treat Islamic boarding school communities as one-way political commodities easily manipulated in the run-up to elections. This independence forced election contestants to shift their campaign approach from relying on the patronage of kiai figures to a contest of ideas based on work programs.

At the downstream level, the political independence of Islamic boarding school students (*santri*) is a key foundation for maintaining national political stability. When millions of first-time voters in West Java's Islamic boarding school base are able to think rationally, the potential for extreme polarization based on identity politics, which often threatens national integration, can be mitigated. Politically independent Islamic boarding school students function as social shock absorbers. They are able to separate sacred religious sentiment from profane political contestation, preventing electoral turmoil from escalating into horizontal conflict within society.

Furthermore, the rational thinking of Islamic boarding school students has a direct impact on demands for public policy formulation based on the principle of *maslahah* (public benefit). In the discourse of modern state governance, Islamic boarding school students no longer demand merely symbolic legal formalization, but rather substantive policies that address social justice, poverty alleviation, and public welfare. This transformation shifts the orientation of Islamic politics in Indonesia from its ideologically confrontational nature to one that is more contributive and accommodating to the Pancasila democratic system.

In a Critical Geopolitical analysis, cyberspace has now become a new non-physical battlefield (digital battlespace) where domestic and global actors spread disinformation to undermine the legitimacy of elections. Critical geopolitics observes that threats to national sovereignty no longer come solely from cross-border military aggression, but also through information warfare that manipulates public perception. In this context, the infiltration of global political hoaxes has the potential to create national instability if it targets vulnerable young voters.

This is where strengthening digital literacy within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) serves as a crucial regional resilience strategy. Islamic boarding schools that successfully equip their students with the skills to critically filter information (*tabayyun*) automatically build cyber defenses at the grassroots level (Mirawati et al., 2025; Rozaki & Izudin, 2025; Sukirjo et al., 2025; Umam & Hasan, 2025). Students are no longer agents of dissemination (amplifiers) of fake news deliberately designed to divide the nation, but rather agents of clarification, breaking the chain of digital disinformation.

This digital resilience, based in Islamic boarding schools, in turn, creates robust macro-regional stability. When a major vote bank like West Java is protected from information distortion and cyber polarization, the legitimacy of national election results will be firmly safeguarded. Stable domestic security in Indonesia during a leadership transition is crucial for geopolitical stability in Southeast Asia, given Indonesia's position as an anchor state in the region.

By integrating moderate Islamic values (*wasathiyah*) with the principles of modern citizenship, Islamic boarding school students (*santri*) demonstrate that religion and democracy are not dichotomous. They construct a model of the ideal voter: religious in ethical principles, yet rational and objective in making political choices. This new narrative challenges Western geopolitical perceptions that often equate the rise of Islamic politics with radicalism or the decline of democracy.

CONCLUSION

From the results of this research and the discussions it conducts, we see that the relationship of Islamic boarding schools with Islamic politics as a result of democratic literacy education for first-time voters in West Java is significant and effective in developing the political awareness of *santri* as first-time voters. This study found that, through the example set by the kiai and the learning system they establish how Islamic boarding schools play a dual role as religious schools and political educational environments where democratic values are inculcated with responsibilities and practices such as responsibility, rationality, ethics, and participation. This discovery demonstrates that the kiai functions as religious authorities, but also effective instruments of democratic literacy as it imparts ethical, tolerant and responsible political practice to *santri* students. But it also poses a challenge to the old assumption that has taken us for granted to see Islamic boarding schools as institutions confined exclusively to normative religious education, and makes evident that Islamic boarding schools also have a strategic role in reinforcing democratic culture in society.

The impact of the formation of democratic literacy of Islamic boarding schools in relation to the influence of Islamic boarding schools is more significant than previously thought, and also, Islamic boarding schools contribute more than expected in the process of the cultivation of first-time voters with moderate, inclusive political orientation and are able to fuse Islamic values with the spirit of nationalism. In scientific terms, this research fills a gap in the literature, by reinforcing prior discoveries about the role of religious institutions in democratization, mainly in the political education of youth. Moreover, this research also contributes to a new outlook of what it looks like for the Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) to serve as a mechanism of democratic literacy teaching for first-time voters, where schooling is not conducted through active political agitation but via the assimilation of the values, the emulation of kiai, and developing of critical and responsible attitudes.

This study thus adds to the scholarship on Islamic politics by showing that the interaction between Islamic boarding schools and Islamic politics is neither always pragmatic and instrumental, but instead is educative and transformative as they are instrumental to the development of healthy democratic culture. Concerning this research problem, we acknowledge a number of limitations related with the fact that the study is based on a particular Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) in West Java and the number of subject matters selected was limited. That means the results cannot be generalized to all Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia. In addition, this study did not comprehensively address differences in other variables such as socioeconomic background, gender, age, access to political information, etc. that could shape the level of democratic literacy and ability of Islamic boarding school students to vote in the first attempt.

These limitations highlight the need for wider-ranging and diversified research. In this respect, it is suggested that future studies may involve an increasing number of Islamic boarding schools in different areas and other considerations whether the curriculum, digital media, and environment play a part in democratic literacy for first-time voters. Therefore, there is a need for more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Islamic boarding schools and Islamic politics as this is crucial for democratic literacy education, which can ultimately contribute academically but also contribute to the development of the smart, independent, and responsible first-time voters in Indonesia to consolidate democracy.

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