

Civic nationalism as democratic mediation: Reinterpreting Indonesia's civic education mandate through Deweyan progressivism

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Abstract

Civic education in Indonesia is mandated by Law No. 20 of 2003 to form both 'democratic and responsible citizens' (Article 3) and citizens with 'a sense of nationality and love of the homeland' (Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph 1). This article examines the normative coherence between these two mandates, arguing that civic education must not only build national identity but also cultivate citizens capable of reasoning, dialogue, participation and responsibility in democratic life. Adopting a qualitative-philosophical approach that combines philosophical hermeneutics, ontological, epistemological and axiological analysis, and immanent critique informed by John Dewey's progressivism, the study identifies three loci of tension: a teleological tension between democratic citizenship and affective national orientation; an epistemic-pedagogical tension between inquiry and student agency on the one hand and value internalisation on the other; and an axiological tension among democracy, human rights, pluralism and nationality. On the basis of these findings, the article formulates anti-indoctrination criteria comprising public reason, fallibilism, student agency, deliberative dialogue and argument-based evaluation. It contributes to the literature by reconstructing national consciousness and love of the homeland as a form of reflective civic nationalism – one that remains compatible with democracy, openness to criticism and public responsibility.

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Introduction

Civic education in established democracies and in societies undergoing democratic transition faces increasingly complex normative dilemmas. On the one hand, it is expected to



shape citizens capable of critical reasoning, dialogue, participation and responsibility in public life. On the other hand, it is frequently mandated to foster national attachment, patriotism and loyalty to the national political community (Cogan & Derricott, 1998; Reichert & Torney-Purta, 2019; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This tension has become increasingly salient in a contemporary context marked by resurgent nationalism, political polarisation, disinformation and signs of democratic decline (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In such circumstances, civic education serves not only to introduce political institutions but also as a normative arena in which the relationship between democracy, patriotism and the formation of civic identity is pedagogically examined.

The tension between democracy and patriotism should not be understood as an absolute contradiction. Patriotism can be a source of solidarity, public concern and commitment to a shared life, particularly when it is directed towards protecting justice, freedom and civic responsibility (Nussbaum, 2013; Viroli, 1995). However, patriotism can also become conformist loyalism when it instils values that stifle criticism, demand symbolic obedience and frame difference as a threat to unity (Callan, 2006; McDonough & Cormier, 2013; Yack, 1996). The central question for civic education, therefore, is not whether national consciousness and patriotism should be taught, but how they should be shaped so that they remain compatible with democracy, human rights, pluralism and civic responsibility. In other words, civic education requires normative mediation if national formation is not to degenerate into indoctrination.

Indonesia is an instructive case for examining this dilemma, because the mandate for Civic Education in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System contains a dual normative configuration. Article 3 states that national education aims to form democratic and responsible citizens, while Article 37 makes Civic Education compulsory curriculum content. The Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1), states that Civic Education is intended to shape students into people with a sense of nationality and love of the homeland (Republic of Indonesia, 2003). The two mandates are not directly contradictory, but neither are they automatically coherent. Article 3 employs the language of democratic civic capacity, whereas the Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1), employs the language of national affection. This difference raises a philosophical question: how can a sense of nationality and love of the homeland be cultivated without eroding citizens' rational autonomy, capacity for deliberation and public responsibility?

This issue cannot be reduced to a difference in legal terminology. The formulation 'a sense of nationality and love of the homeland' is open-ended and admits two readings. First, it can be understood as civic nationalism, that is, a national attachment grounded in public participation, respect for plurality, state accountability and civic responsibility. Second, it can slide into conformist loyalism, a form of nationalism that demands symbolic obedience, discourages criticism and privileges uniformity over public reason. This ambivalence mirrors debates in the theory of nationalism, which show that the nation can be a source of political solidarity but can also become a basis for exclusion when detached from the principles of citizenship and the recognition of plurality (Anderson, 1983/2006; Kymlicka, 2001; Miller, 1995; Yack, 1996). The central problem this study addresses, therefore, lies not in the existence of a national mandate as such, but in the pedagogical and normative conditions under which nationality can be formed democratically.

Within this framework, Article 4 of the National Education System Law occupies an important position, as it stipulates that education must be organised democratically, fairly and without discrimination, upholding human rights, religious values, cultural values and national diversity (Republic of Indonesia, 2003). This provision sets internal limits on all educational aims, including the cultivation of a sense of nationality and love of the homeland. Accordingly, the national mandate in Civic Education cannot be interpreted as instilling a loyalty that is closed to criticism; rather, it must be situated within the horizon of democracy, justice, rights

and diversity. If nationality is placed above democracy, Civic Education risks producing citizens who are symbolically obedient but weak in public reasoning. If, by contrast, democratic principles mediate nationality, love of the homeland can be understood as a reflective commitment to caring for and improving a shared life.

To assess the coherence of this mandate, the study employs John Dewey's progressivism as an evaluative framework. In the Deweyan tradition, democracy is not merely a system of government but a mode of associated living that is learned through communication, social experience, participation and inquiry (Dewey, 1916; Quay, 2016; Waks, 2016). Education intended to develop democratic citizens cannot be pursued through anti-democratic means; it must provide learning experiences that enable students to examine problems, weigh reasons, engage in dialogue and reconstruct their understanding through social experience (Dewey, 1938; Lind, 2023). The cultivation of national consciousness and patriotism therefore has pedagogical legitimacy only if it takes place through a reflective and dialogical process that is open to correction and allows students to scrutinise reasons. Here, progressivism provides a basis for distinguishing democratic values education from indoctrination.

Indoctrination is a pressing concern because civic education is always bound up with values, political identity and a particular conception of the citizen to be formed. Education does not become indoctrinatory simply because it teaches values; it becomes so when values are taught in ways that foreclose rational evaluation, restrict objection and position learners as passive recipients of final authority (Armstrong, 2022; Moilanen & Huttunen, 2025). The mandate to cultivate 'a sense of nationality and love of the homeland' must therefore be examined not only in terms of its aims but also in terms of the means by which it is realised. In democratic civic education, a sense of nationality must be answerable to public reason, open to correction and compatible with learner agency.

Research on Civic Education in Indonesia has extensively addressed the curriculum, civic disposition, the strengthening of nationalism, character education, civic participation, critical literacy and classroom practice. Several studies emphasise the importance of revitalising Civic Education, strengthening nationalism and developing civic competences in the Indonesian context (Kalidjernih & Winarno, 2019; Mulyono, 2017; Murdiono & Wuryandani, 2021). Others examine civic engagement, young citizens' critical literacy, and global citizenship education in relation to the Pancasila Student Profile and the dynamics of contemporary citizenship (Maulana & Milanti, 2023; Nurjanah et al., 2024; Sutrisno et al., 2023). Valuable as these studies are, they leave largely unexplored the normative coherence of the Civic Education mandate in the National Education System Law as a pedagogical corpus. Few studies have specifically examined the relationship between Articles 3, 4 and 37 and the Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1), as a normative configuration embodying the tension between democratic citizenship and national orientation. This study addresses that gap by examining the types of citizens that the National Education System Law presupposes, the modes of citizenship formation it envisages and the hierarchy of values governing the relationship between democracy, responsibility and nationality.

On this basis, the study treats the National Education System Law as an authoritative normative text containing ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions about Civic Education. It has three aims: to map the normative tension between the democratic citizenship mandate and the national mandate in Articles 3, 4 and 37 and the Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1); to formulate anti-indoctrination criteria grounded in Dewey's progressivism; and to reconstruct a sense of nationality and love of the homeland as reflective civic nationalism. Its principal contribution is developing an anti-indoctrination framework, reconstructing civic nationalism, and bridging patriotism and democratic citizenship in civic education. The study thus argues that Civic Education can cultivate love of the homeland without lapsing into conformist loyalism, provided that nationality is subordinated to public reason, student agency, deliberative dialogue and democratic responsibility.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative-philosophical design based on document analysis and normative inquiry, reading legal texts as a normative corpus of education (Bowen, 2009; Yanow, 2000). This design was chosen because the study does not seek to measure the empirical implementation of Civic Education, but rather to interpret and test the coherence of its normative mandate in Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System. The primary corpus comprises Articles 3, 4 and 37 and the Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1). The unit of analysis is the normative proposition concerning the aims of education, the citizen as subject, the mode of citizenship formation and the value orientation of Civic Education.

The analysis proceeded in six stages. First, the selected articles were subjected to close reading to identify explicit and implicit normative statements. Second, these statements were categorised under the themes of educational aims, the citizen as subject, citizenship formation and value hierarchy. Third, the resulting categories were mapped ontologically, epistemologically and axiologically. Fourth, immanent critique was used to examine the internal consistency between the mandate to form democratic citizens, the principles governing the organisation of education and the mandate to cultivate national consciousness and patriotism (Herzog, 2016; Jaeggi, 2018). Fifth, the findings of this reading were evaluated against John Dewey's progressivism, particularly the principles of democracy as a way of life, inquiry, dialogue, growth and anti-indoctrination (Dewey, 1916, 1938; Quay, 2016). Sixth, national consciousness and patriotism were reconstructed as a reflective civic nationalism compatible with democracy.

The argument's validity was ensured through textual traceability, conceptual coherence, critical engagement with the relevant literature, and testing of counter-arguments. As the study is based on public documents and involves no human participants, animals or personal data, ethics approval was not required.

Results and Discussion

Dual Teleology in Civic Education

A hermeneutic reading of Law No. 20 of 2003 shows that the Civic Education mandate is shaped by a dual teleology. On the one hand, Article 3 sets the aim of national education as the formation of democratic and responsible citizens. This formulation makes democratic citizenship an intrinsic aim of national education rather than a supplementary attribute. On the other hand, Article 37 institutionalises Civic Education as compulsory content, while the Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1), assigns it the specific mandate of cultivating a sense of nationality and love of the homeland (Republic of Indonesia, 2003).

This dual teleology is not directly contradictory, but it has not been conceptually mediated. Article 3 speaks the language of public capacity, namely democracy, responsibility, participation and civic accountability. The Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1), by contrast, speaks the language of collective affection, namely national consciousness and love of the homeland. Where these two orientations are not connected by an explicit mediating principle, Civic Education may develop in either of two directions: towards forming deliberative citizens or towards forming loyalist, conformist citizens.

These findings suggest that the principal problem with the Civic Education mandate lies not in a lack of aims, but in the way those aims are formulated. Civic education always raises normative questions about the kind of citizen it seeks to form: merely obedient citizens, actively participating citizens or citizens capable of critically assessing questions of justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In the context of the National Education System Law, these questions are all the more acute because the democratic aims and the national mandate both carry normative authority.

Epistemic Tension between Inquiry and Internalisation

The second finding concerns the epistemic-pedagogical tension between inquiry-based learning and the formation of values through internalisation. The aim of forming democratic and responsible citizens requires an educational process that allows students to ask questions, weigh reasons, engage in dialogue and examine the consequences of actions. In the Deweyan tradition, democratic education is inseparable from inquiry, social experience and the development of reflective thinking (Dewey, 1916, 1938).

However, the phrase ‘cultivating a sense of nationality and love of the homeland’ can be read as an affective mandate closely associated with internalisation, habituation or the instilling of values. The internalisation of values is not in itself problematic. It becomes so when it is carried out in a closed manner, demands acceptance without reasons and restricts the scope for rational objection. It is here that the boundary between values education and indoctrination becomes crucial. Education does not become indoctrinatory simply because it teaches values; it becomes so when values are taught in ways that foreclose rational evaluation and weaken learner agency (Hand, 2025; Moilanen & Huttunen, 2025).

The epistemic tension within the Civic Education mandate thus lies in how nationality is formed. If a sense of nationality is cultivated as an affection that ‘must be accepted’, Civic Education risks becoming a mere transmission of loyalty. If, conversely, it is formed through social experience, inquiry and public dialogue, nationalism can become part of the formation of democratic citizens. What is at issue, then, is not national values as such, but their epistemic status and the pedagogical means by which they are formed.

Axiological Ambivalence in Civic Education

The third finding concerns the axiological ambivalence of the Civic Education mandate. The National Education System Law contains several core values of equal importance, namely democracy, responsibility, human rights, diversity, nationalism and love of the homeland. Article 4 is crucial in this respect, as it stipulates that education must be conducted democratically, fairly and without discrimination, upholding human rights, religious values, cultural values and national diversity (Republic of Indonesia, 2003).

However, the National Education System Law does not specify a corrective hierarchy for cases in which these values conflict. Consequently, nationality can be interpreted in two ways. First, it can be placed within the horizon of democracy, so that love of the homeland is understood as citizens’ commitment to upholding justice, respecting plurality and participating in public life. Second, it can be placed above democracy, so that citizens’ criticism, differences and objections are regarded as threats to unity.

This ambivalence matters because civic education not only teaches values but also constructs relationships between them. In a deliberative democracy, public values must be justified by reasons that other citizens can scrutinise, rather than by authoritative claims that are closed to criticism (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 2005). The national mandate in Civic Education is therefore coherent with its democratic aims only when it is interpreted through the principles of democracy, human rights, pluralism and public responsibility.

Anti-Indoctrination Criteria

On the basis of an immanent reading of Articles 3, 4 and 37 and the Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1), this study formulates anti-indoctrination criteria as a condition for the pedagogical legitimacy of national formation in Civic Education. These criteria are not an external addition but follow from the internal structure of the National Education System Law itself. If national education aims to form democratic and responsible citizens, and if it must be conducted democratically, fairly and without discrimination, with respect for human rights and

diversity, then a sense of nationality must not be cultivated through mechanisms that foreclose reasoning.

The anti-indoctrination criteria comprise five elements. First, public reason: national values must be justified by reasons that can be tested in the public sphere, not merely asserted as emotional demands. Second, fallibilism: claims made in the name of the nation must not be treated as final truths immune from criticism. Third, student agency: students must be positioned as subjects capable of evaluating, questioning and taking a stance. Fourth, deliberative dialogue: differences of opinion must be worked through dialogically rather than suppressed for the sake of uniformity. Fifth, argument-based evaluation: success in Civic Education should be measured not by symbolic compliance, but by students' ability to give reasons, respond to objections and justify their civic positions. Table 1 summarises these criteria.

Table 1.

Anti-indoctrination criteria in Civic Education

Anti-indoctrination Criteria	Meaning in Civic Education	Pedagogical Implications
Public Reason	Nationality must be justified by reasons that can be jointly examined.	Students are asked to explain their reasons for loving their homeland with reference to public issues rather than slogans.
Fallibilism	Claims made 'for the sake of the nation' are open to correction.	National narratives are not treated as the only truth.
Student Agency	Students are subjects of reasoning, not passive recipients.	Teachers make room for questions, evaluations and opinions.
Deliberative Dialogue	Differences are worked through in discussion among equals.	The classroom becomes a space for exchanging reasons, not for standardising answers.
Argument-Based Evaluation	Assessment emphasises the quality of reasoning and public responsibility.	Assessment measures argumentation, social sensitivity and the ability to respond to objections.

Source: Research Data, 2026.

These criteria do not reject the cultivation of national consciousness; rather, they safeguard it pedagogically against becoming indoctrination. Civic Education can still foster love of the homeland, but such love must emerge through reasoning, social experience, dialogue and public responsibility.

Reflective Civic Nationalism

The fifth finding is the reconstruction of nationalism and love of the homeland as reflective civic nationalism. The phrase 'a sense of nationality and love of the homeland' cannot be read as a neutral psychological statement, because it belongs to the same legal corpus as Articles 3 and 4. The meaning of nationality in Civic Education must therefore be bounded by the aim of forming democratic citizens and by the principles that education be democratic, fair and non-discriminatory, and that it respect human rights and value diversity.

Reflective civic nationalism differs from conformist loyalism. Conformist loyalism measures nationality in terms of symbolic obedience, narrative uniformity and uncritical acceptance. Reflective civic nationalism, by contrast, understands nationality as a civic commitment to caring for a shared life, improving public institutions, respecting plurality and testing political claims through public reason. In this sense, criticism is not the opposite of love of one's country but an expression of civic responsibility.

This reconstruction accords with wider debates on civic nationalism and patriotism. Nationalism can be a source of political solidarity, but it can also turn into exclusion and closed loyalty when separated from the principles of citizenship, rights and plurality (Anderson, 1983/2006; McDonough & Cormier, 2013; Miller, 1995; Yack, 1996). Civic Education therefore needs to reorient nationality away from symbolic obedience and towards a reflective engagement that is open to reason, criticism and public responsibility.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the main problem with the Civic Education mandate in Law No. 20 of 2003 is not the existence of a national mandate, but the lack of clear normative mediation between democratic citizenship and patriotic orientation. This study does not, therefore, reject patriotism or love of country in Civic Education. What it calls into question is the possibility that patriotism may be cultivated in ways that foreclose public reason, weaken student agency and treat criticism as a threat to unity. In the context of democratic education, this matters because education concerns not only the attainment of formal goals but also the formation of subjects who are able to judge, act responsibly and take a stance in communal life (Biesta, 2015). The national mandate in Civic Education therefore needs to be examined not only in terms of its value content but also in terms of how those values are pedagogically formed.

Within the framework of Dewey's progressivism, this problem can be read as one of consistency between ends and means. Dewey understood democracy not merely as a system of government but as a way of life built through communication, social experience, inquiry and participation (Dewey, 1916). Democratic citizens cannot, therefore, be formed through anti-democratic pedagogy. If Civic Education aims to shape democratic and responsible citizens, the learning process must allow students to ask questions, evaluate reasons, engage in dialogue and revise their understanding. This accords with Gutmann's (1987) view that democratic education must prepare citizens to participate reflectively in political and social life, rather than passively accept the authority of prescribed values. In this sense, the anti-indoctrination criteria formulated here are a pedagogical corollary of democracy as a way of life.

This finding also speaks to the theory of deliberative democracy, which holds that political legitimacy rests not solely on authority or obedience but on the exchange of reasons that other citizens can accept and scrutinise (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1996). Applied to Civic Education, this principle implies that nationalism and love of the homeland should not be taught as final claims to be accepted without objection. Rather, both should be understood as commitments that can be discussed, tested and justified within a deliberative pedagogical space. Civic Education classrooms should thus become spaces for practising democracy, not merely for reproducing national slogans.

Within the international debate on nationalism, these findings occupy a mediating position. On the one hand, nationalism cannot simply be rejected, since it can provide solidarity, a sense of belonging and commitment to a shared life. On the other hand, it must not be allowed to harden into a loyalism that forecloses criticism and marginalises plurality. The debate on patriotism, civic nationalism and loyalism shows that education plays a decisive role in shaping the form of nationhood that emerges (McDonough & Cormier, 2013; Nussbaum, 2013; Viroli, 1995; Yack, 1996). In this context, the article's contribution is to reinterpret nationalism and patriotism as reflective civic nationalism: a nationalism that is committed to a shared life yet remains answerable to public reason, justice, rights and pluralism.

These findings have practical implications in three domains. First, at the level of the curriculum, the aims of Civic Education should be formulated not only in terms of strengthening national consciousness but also in terms of developing capacities for public reasoning, dialogue, participation and civic responsibility. Second, at the level of pedagogy, Civic Education should move from the transmission of values towards inquiry, problem-based learning, discussion of public issues and deliberation. Third, at the level of assessment, success in Civic Education

should be measured by the quality of students' argumentation, their ability to respond to difference, their openness to correction and their sensitivity to social consequences, rather than by uniform answers or the memorisation of national values. National consciousness and love of the homeland are thereby not reduced to symbolic affection, but are cultivated as practices of democratic citizenship.

As a document-based normative study, this research does not examine how Civic Education is implemented in the classroom. This limitation, however, also points to its contribution: before classroom practice can be assessed, the normative mandate must be clarified so that the evaluation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment does not rest on ambiguous standards. Future research could examine how this dual teleology is realised in Civic Education curricula, textbooks, teaching modules and classroom practice, and how the anti-indoctrination criteria might serve as instruments for pedagogical evaluation.

Overall, this study shows that Civic Education can be sustained as democratic education only if nationality is not placed above democracy but is instead mediated by public reason, fallibilism, student agency, deliberative dialogue and public responsibility. Love of one's country need not, therefore, result in conformist loyalism; it can become reflective civic nationalism when it is cultivated through democratic means.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the Civic Education mandate in Law No. 20 of 2003 contains a normative ambivalence between the aim of forming democratic and responsible citizens in Article 3 and the mandate to cultivate a sense of nationality and love of the homeland in the Elucidation of Article 37, paragraph (1). Through hermeneutic reading, ontological, epistemological and axiological mapping, and immanent critique grounded in Dewey's progressivism, this ambivalence is shown to manifest itself in teleological, epistemic-pedagogical and axiological tensions which, if not normatively mediated, risk shifting Civic Education from the formation of deliberative citizens towards conformist loyalism. The study therefore proposes anti-indoctrination criteria – public reason, fallibilism, student agency, deliberative dialogue and argument-based evaluation – as conditions for the pedagogical legitimacy of national formation. On the basis of these criteria, national consciousness and love of the homeland are reconstructed as reflective civic nationalism that is compatible with democracy, human rights, pluralism and public responsibility. It follows that the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment of Civic Education need to shift from symbolic obedience towards public problem-based learning, inquiry, deliberation and the assessment of public reasoning capacity. Theoretically, the study argues that Civic Education becomes democratic not by weakening nationalism, but by subjecting it to public reason, openness to criticism and shared responsibility.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Ethics Approval

This study is based on publicly available legal documents and secondary literature. It did not involve human participants, animals or personal data; ethics approval was therefore not required.

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