

POLITICAL PARTIES BETWEEN ELECTORAL INTERESTS AND PUBLIC REPRESENTATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

Political parties are a key pillar of representative democracy, but in local democratic practices in Indonesia, their role tends to be diminished by the dominance of electoral interests. This article aims to critically analyze how the electoral orientation of political parties influences the quality of public representation, transactional political practices, and elite power relations in the context of regional head elections (Pilkada). This research uses a qualitative approach using literature review and document analysis, including Pilkada regulations and previous empirical studies. The analytical framework is based on the theories of procedural and substantive democracy (Dahl), the institutionalization of political parties (Panebianco), and the theory of political oligarchy (Winters). The results show that high political costs encourage the practice of political dowries, candidate dependence on sponsors, and the strengthening of transactional politics, ultimately weakening the accountability of regional heads after their election. Furthermore, the dominance of local elites and the lack of political competition indicate that political parties function more as arenas for elite negotiation than as institutions of public representation. These findings highlight the gap between procedural and substantive democracy in local democracy. This article concludes that strengthening local democracy requires institutional reform of political parties to reorient them toward representing the public interest.

Keywords: political parties; electoral interests; public representation; regional elections; local democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

Political parties are central actors in representative democracy because they serve as the primary link between citizens and the state through the articulation and aggregation of interests, political recruitment, and the provision of alternative public policies (Dahl, 1971; Schattschneider, 1942). In modern democratic systems, political parties serve not only as electoral vehicles but also as institutions that support the sustainability of democracy through political education, leadership development, and the formulation of public policy agendas. Without effectively functioning political parties, democracy has the potential to be reduced to an electoral procedure that loses its representative meaning.

In the context of post-Reform democracy in Indonesia, the role of political parties has become increasingly strategic with the implementation of decentralization and direct regional head elections (Pilkada). Decentralization opens up space for local actors to participate in the political process, while direct Pilkada is designed as a means of deepening local democracy with the aim of strengthening citizen

participation, increasing regional head accountability, and strengthening the legitimacy of local power. Within this framework, political parties are positioned as key actors bridging community interests with the political decision-making process.

Normatively, political parties are expected to strengthen public representation and produce regional leadership that is accountable and responsive to community needs. Parties should conduct open and meritocratic political recruitment, develop sustainable cadre development, and offer a clear ideological platform. However, various studies indicate that party practices in Indonesia, particularly at the local level, do not fully reflect these normative functions.

Numerous empirical studies indicate that political parties often fail to effectively represent public interests due to internal issues such as corruption, nepotism, and low transparency in decision-making processes (Naimah Putri, 2024). The regional head nomination process often takes place in an elitist and transactional manner, resulting in internal party cadres and grassroots aspirations being marginalized by the interests of elites and powerful actors.

Furthermore, political parties in Indonesia face issues of internal integration and organizational resilience in the context of electoral democracy. Kristiyanto et al. (2023) show that the pressures of electoral competition push parties to focus more on candidate electability and short-term strategies than on organizational and ideological strengthening. This condition makes parties personalistic and institutionally fragile.

Regional elections, which should deepen local democracy, often reinforce transactional politics and the dominance of local elites. High political costs encourage the dependence of parties and candidates on economic elites, resulting in low policy accountability after election (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Rusnaedy, 2021). The phenomenon of single candidates in regional elections also reflects weakened political competition and the strengthening of local elite cartelization (Hannan, 2023).

This situation widens the gap between procedural and substantive democracy. Despite the functioning of electoral procedures, the quality of representation, accountability, and responsiveness of public policy remain weak (Dahl, 1971). Hadiz (2010) asserts that Indonesian democracy develops within the context of oligarchic power relations, where political parties play a role in reproducing elite dominance. Weak cadre development, low ideological integration, and a pragmatic orientation toward electoral victory further exacerbate the local democratic deficit (Simanjutak, 2024). Therefore, this article aims to critically analyze how electoral interests shape the behavior of political parties in local democracy in Indonesia, the extent to which these practices weaken public representation, and how elite power relations are reproduced through local electoral mechanisms mediated by political parties.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-critical analysis design to deeply understand the dynamics of political party behavior in local

democracy in Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore meanings, processes, and power relations that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative data alone (Creswell, 2014). The research data was obtained through a literature review of books, national and international journal articles, and research reports relevant to the themes of political parties, regional elections, and local democracy. Furthermore, this study utilized document analysis of relevant regulations, such as the Regional Election Law and General Elections Commission Regulations (PKPU), to understand the normative framework governing party practices and regional head elections.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques, identifying patterns, trends, and key issues related to electoral interests, public representation, and elite power relations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research's analytical framework integrates theories of procedural–substantive democracy (Dahl, 1971), the institutionalization of political parties (Panebianco, 1988), and political oligarchy (Winters, 2011) to critically interpret the findings. Through this procedure, the research seeks to produce a comprehensive understanding of the implications of political parties' electoral orientations for the quality of local democracy..

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main research findings and an analytical discussion of the dynamics of the role of political parties in local democracy in Indonesia. The analysis focuses on how political parties' electoral orientation shapes institutional behavior, relations with voters, and their implications for the quality of public representation. The findings presented are a synthesis of literature studies, analysis of regional election regulatory documents, and a critical reading of party practices in the context of local electoral democracy.

In general, the research findings indicate a structural tension between the normative function of political parties as representative institutions and their empirical practices as pragmatic electoral actors. This tension does not exist in isolation but is intertwined with the design of electoral democracy, the high costs of politics, and strengthening elite power relations at the local level. In this context, regional elections become a strategic arena that clearly demonstrates how political parties prioritize electoral interests over strengthening their representational function and educating citizens about politics..

3.1 Electoral Orientation of Political Parties in Local Democracy

The main findings of this study indicate that political parties in Indonesia's local democracies tend to prioritize electoral victory over strengthening their public representation function. This electoral orientation is reflected in almost all stages of party activity, from the regional head nomination process and campaign strategies to the formation of political coalitions. In practice, political parties prioritize elections—

particularly regional elections—as an end in itself, rather than as an instrument for realizing substantive political representation and accountability.

This dominance of electoral interests is most evident in the process of determining regional head candidates. The research findings indicate that political parties prioritize candidates with high electability, widespread popularity, and sufficient financial capacity to finance electoral contests. These factors are often the primary considerations over the candidate's track record of cadre development, ideological commitment, or leadership capacity in championing public interests. As a result, long-standing internal party cadres with a strong ideological understanding are often marginalized by external figures deemed more "electorally victorious."

These findings demonstrate that the logic of electoral competition has shifted the orientation of political parties from representative institutions to pragmatic actors operating like election machines. In the context of regional elections (Pilkada), political parties tend to act as "political brokers" facilitating transactions between candidates, party elites, and capital owners. The nomination process is also elitist and closed, severely limiting the participation of cadres and grassroots communities. This situation indicates that the party's function as a channel for articulating and aggregating public interests is increasingly being reduced.

Furthermore, this study found that internal cadre formation mechanisms are often neglected in the nomination process. Cadre formation, which should be the foundation of party institutionalization, is instead viewed as a process irrelevant to the demands of short-term electoral competition. Many parties lack a sustainable and meritocratic cadre formation system, resulting in ad hoc and transactional political recruitment processes. In this situation, cadre loyalty is not built through internalization of party values and ideology, but rather through calculations of interests and access to power.

These empirical findings support Panebianco's (1988) thesis on the weak institutionalization of political parties. According to Panebianco, parties that are not strongly institutionalized tend to rely on figures, external resources, and pragmatic strategies to survive in political competition. In the context of local democracy in Indonesia, this weak institutionalization is reflected in the low autonomy of party organizations, dependence on powerful candidates, and a lack of ideological consistency in political decision-making. Political parties no longer act as organizations with long-term goals, but rather as flexible and opportunistic electoral vehicles.

This dominant electoral orientation also has a direct impact on the weakening of public representation. When electoral victory is the primary goal, the interests of the wider public tend to be subordinated to the interests of party elites and candidates. Political programs and policy platforms are often formulated symbolically to meet campaign needs, rather than as substantive commitments to be realized after the election. This creates a widening gap between political promises and post-election government practices, and diminishes public trust in political parties. From a democratic theory

perspective, these findings suggest that local democracy in Indonesia is increasingly moving toward procedural democracy, as proposed by Dahl (1971). Procedural democracy emphasizes formal aspects such as regular elections, competition between candidates, and voter participation, but does not automatically guarantee the realization of substantive democracy which includes representation of public interests, political accountability, and policy responsiveness.

In the context of regional elections (Pilkada), electoral procedures proceed according to regulations, but the substance of democracy is weakened by the dominance of electoral interests and party pragmatism.

Furthermore, the electoral orientation of political parties also contributes to the strengthening of transactional politics and the dominance of local elites. Parties' dependence on financially powerful candidates opens up space for negotiations between political and economic elites. In many cases, party support for candidates is not ideological or programmatic, but rather based on the candidate's ability to provide resources to the party and its surrounding elite networks. This situation reinforces exclusive power relations and closes off space for more inclusive political participation. From a local democracy perspective, this phenomenon has serious implications for the quality of local governance. Regional heads elected through a highly electoral and transactional political process tend to have weak accountability to the public. Post-election policy orientations are often more responsive to the interests of supporting elites than to the needs of the broader community. Thus, the electoral orientation of political parties not only influences the nomination process but also has long-term impacts on the direction and quality of public policy at the local level.

This discussion demonstrates that the problems of local democracy in Indonesia are inextricably linked to the way political parties interpret and implement their roles. When political parties focus more on electability and short-term victories, their normative functions as democratic institutions are marginalized. In this context, regional elections (Pilkada) are no longer a means of deepening democracy, but rather an arena for elite competition procedurally legitimized through elections.

Thus, the findings of this study confirm that the electoral orientation of political parties is a key factor explaining the weakening of public representation in local democracy. This finding also strengthens the argument that local democratic reform cannot be achieved simply by improving electoral procedures but must also target political party institutional reform. Without strengthening cadre development, ideological consistency, and a focus on public representation, political parties will continue to be trapped in pragmatic electoral logic, and local democracy will remain procedurally devoid of substance.

3.2 Weakening of Public Representation

The findings of this study indicate that one of the most significant implications of the dominant electoral orientation of political parties in local democracy in Indonesia is the weakening of public representation. Political representation, normatively the

core of representative democracy, is not adequately realized in party practices at the local level. Public aspirations are not systematically articulated in party agendas and policies, party-voter relationships are short-term and transactional, and the representation process reflects elite interests more than the interests of the broader public.

Ideally, political parties function as channels for the articulation and aggregation of diverse societal interests into political agendas and public policies. However, the findings of this study indicate that this function has suffered serious degradation. In the context of local democracy, political parties tend to lack effective mechanisms for absorbing and processing public aspirations on a sustainable basis. Party activities are more focused on electoral moments, particularly in the run-up to regional elections (Pilkada), while substantive interaction with constituents outside the election period is relatively limited.

As a result, public aspirations often appear only symbolically in campaign narratives with no guarantee of policy implementation after election. Party political agendas are formulated top-down by party elites or candidate campaign teams, rather than through a deliberative process involving the party's social base. Many strategic societal issues—such as economic inequality, access to public services, and the protection of vulnerable groups—are not adequately accommodated in party political platforms. The resulting representation is also illusory, as it emphasizes electoral imagery over policy substance.

The weakening of public representation is also reflected in the short-term and transactional nature of party-voter relationships. These relationships are built through a logic of pragmatic exchange, such as mobilizing support through material incentives, short-term assistance, or unsustainable political promises. Ideological and programmatic links between parties and voters become weak, even virtually non-existent. Voters are positioned more as a voting base mobilized during elections than as citizens with long-term political interests.

In this situation, political parties fail to build voter loyalty based on trust and shared political vision. Party-voter relationships become fragile and easily changed by electoral dynamics. This situation not only harms voters but also weakens the capacity of parties as representative institutions. When relationships with voters are temporary and transactional, parties lose the incentive to advocate for long-term, potentially electorally unpopular public policies.

Furthermore, this study found that political representation practices at the local level largely reflect elite interests rather than the interests of the broader public. Party elites, economic elites, and local political actors with strong financial resources and power networks play a dominant role in determining policy agendas and directions. Political parties often function as negotiation arenas for elite interests, where political decisions are made through compromises among elites, rather than based on constituent aspirations.

This elite dominance narrows the representational space for groups without access to political and economic resources. Poor groups, indigenous peoples, and marginalized communities often lack effective channels of representation within political party structures. Their aspirations tend to be marginalized unless they have electoral value or can be used symbolically in campaigns. Thus, the resulting political representation is exclusive and non-inclusive.

This situation indicates a crisis of political representation in local democracy. Democracy continues to operate procedurally through elections, but it has lost its substantive meaning as a system that represents the will and interests of the people. Elections no longer function optimally as a mechanism of political accountability because voter choice has been limited by candidates and agendas selected by party elites and powerful actors.

From the perspective of democratic theory, this situation confirms the critique of electoral democracy, which overemphasizes formal procedures without regard for the quality of representation. Procedural democracy allows elite circulation through elections, but does not guarantee that the resulting power is used to advance the public interest. In the context of local democracy, elections have the potential to become a means of legitimizing elite dominance if not accompanied by strong party institutionalization and a clear representational orientation.

3.3 Transactional Politics and Political Costs

Research findings indicate that the high costs of candidacy and campaigning in regional elections (Pilkada) are a key factor shaping the behavior of political parties and candidates in local democracy in Indonesia. Political costs encompass not only official campaign expenditures but also informal costs such as political dowries, internal party lobbying costs, mobilizing elite networks, and securing political support at the local level. In practice, these high costs encourage parties and candidates to engage in transactional politics, which has become increasingly prevalent over time.

One key finding is that the practice of political dowries and elite negotiations has become a relatively common phenomenon in the regional head nomination process. Political dowries are often understood as a candidate's "contribution" to the party as a condition for securing support for the nomination. Although normatively and legally prohibited, empirical findings indicate that political dowries continue to occur informally and covertly. In this context, political parties no longer function as institutions for selecting leadership based on merit and cadre development, but rather as gateways to power accessible through political transactions.

The high cost of candidacy has direct implications for candidates' increased dependence on political sponsors, whether from the economic elite, local businesspeople, or political patronage networks. Candidates without adequate financial resources tend to be eliminated from the race, regardless of their leadership capacity or track record of public service. Consequently, regional elections (Pilkada)

become an unequal competition, with access to capital a primary prerequisite for participation.

This discussion of these findings corroborates the analysis of Aspinall and Berenschot (2019), which shows that electoral democracy in Indonesia is heavily influenced by the practices of money politics and clientelism. According to them, elections and regional elections are inextricably linked to a network of material exchanges between political elites, candidates, and voters. In this context, political parties often act as facilitators of political transactions, rather than as institutions that prioritize programs and ideologies. Money politics and clientelism are not merely anomalies but structural components of electoral democracy.

Furthermore, high political costs create strong incentives for corrupt practices and abuse of power after election. Regional heads who win elections through high-cost political processes face pressure to "recoup the political capital" expended during the contest. This pressure often translates into rent-seeking practices, collusion with businesspeople, budget manipulation, and public policies that favor the interests of political sponsors. Thus, high political costs directly impact regional heads' low accountability to the public.

From a democratic perspective, this situation creates a serious paradox. On the one hand, elections provide procedural legitimacy through direct election by the people. However, on the other hand, transactional political processes erode substantive legitimacy because the resulting policies reflect the interests of elite supporters rather than the aspirations of the broader public. Political parties, which should be guardians of the public interest, are instead trapped in a transactional logic that weakens their representative function.

Thus, transactional politics and high political costs are not merely technical electoral issues but structural problems intertwined with parties' electoral orientation and weak institutionalization of local democracy. As long as political parties rely on the financial resources of candidates and sponsors, transactional practices will continue to be reproduced and become an inherent part of elections.

3.4 Local Elite Dominance and the Reproduction of Power

Further research findings indicate that local elites play a dominant role in determining the direction and decisions of political parties in local democracy. These elites include party elites, economic elites, local political figures, and actors with strong social influence and power networks. This elite dominance is reflected in the nomination process, coalition formation, and the determination of political agendas for parties at the regional level.

One of the most obvious indicators of local elite dominance is the phenomenon of single candidates and minimal political competition in a number of regions. Research findings indicate that this phenomenon is not simply a result of a lack of candidates, but rather the result of agreements and cartelization among local political elites facilitated by political parties. In many cases, parties prefer to compromise and

support a single strong candidate rather than open up space for competition that could potentially disrupt elite stability and the distribution of power.

This situation demonstrates that political parties function as arenas for elite negotiation, rather than as means of public representation. Political decisions are made through closed agreements between elites, while the interests of the wider community are a secondary consideration. Parties are no longer instruments of democratization, but rather mechanisms for managing elite conflict to ensure their interests remain within safe limits.

This discussion of findings aligns with Winters' (2011) theory of political oligarchy, which emphasizes that in many electoral democracies, effective power remains concentrated in the hands of a small elite possessing material and political resources. Elections and regional elections do not eliminate oligarchic dominance, but rather provide new mechanisms for elites to maintain and reproduce their power legally and procedurally. In the Indonesian context, electoral democracy coexists with oligarchic power structures.

This analysis is also consistent with Hadiz's (2010) study, which shows that decentralization and local democracy in Indonesia have actually opened up greater space for local elites to consolidate power. Rather than strengthening public participation, local democracy often reinforces elite dominance through control of economic resources, bureaucracy, and political parties. Parties become a crucial tool in this process of localization of power.

Local elite dominance has serious implications for the quality of democracy. First, it narrows the space for meaningful political participation for citizens. Second, it hinders leadership regeneration and political innovation because power circulates within the same elite. Third, it weakens accountability because political elites tend to protect each other within closed power networks. In this context, local democracy operates within an unequal and exclusive power structure.

3.5 The Gap Between Procedural and Substantive Democracy

The research findings in this subchapter indicate a sharp gap between procedural and substantive democracy in local democratic practices. Procedurally, regional elections (Pilkada) in Indonesia have been conducted in accordance with the applicable legal and regulatory framework. The election process is conducted periodically, involves voter participation, and is supervised by election management and supervisory bodies. From a procedural perspective, the Pilkada can be said to meet the minimum standards of electoral democracy.

However, the research findings indicate that the substance of democracy—such as accountability, responsiveness, and fair representation—remains weak. The formal electoral process does not automatically produce accountable local governments that support the public interest. Instead, local democracy often produces leadership that is beholden to the interests of elites and political sponsors.

The discussion of these findings confirms the dichotomy of procedural versus substantive democracy as proposed by Dahl (1971). According to Dahl, procedural democracy only ensures mechanisms for participation and competition, but does not guarantee that democratic outcomes will reflect the will of the people or produce fair policies. In the context of local democracy in Indonesia, electoral procedures are in place, but the substance of democracy is diminished by party electoral orientation, transactional politics, and elite dominance.

Furthermore, these findings demonstrate that electoral reform without political party reform is partial and inadequate. Improving regional election regulations, strengthening election management institutions, and increasing voter participation will not be sufficient if political parties continue to operate as pragmatic electoral machines. Without strengthening party institutionalization, cadre development, and public representation, local democracy will continue to suffer from substantive deficits.

Thus, the gap between procedural and substantive democracy is a logical consequence of the interaction between high political costs, transactional politics, and local elite dominance. These three factors reinforce each other and form a structure of local democracy that is formally procedural but substantively weak. Political parties are at the center of this structure, both as actors reproducing problems and as potential solutions if serious institutional reforms are implemented.

4. CONCLUSION

This research confirms that the main problem with local democracy in Indonesia lies not solely in the procedural design of regional elections, but rather in the way political parties carry out their roles within the electoral democracy system. The findings indicate that the dominant electoral orientation has driven political parties to transform into pragmatic election machines, significantly weakening their functions of public representation, political cadre formation, and citizen political education. The high cost of politics in regional elections reinforces transactional political practices, including political dowries and candidate dependence on political sponsors, which in turn reduces the level of accountability of regional heads after their election.

Furthermore, the dominance of local elites in political party structures and decision-making demonstrates that local democracy operates within unequal and exclusive power relations. The lack of political competition, including the emergence of single candidates in several regions, indicates that political parties function more as arenas for elite negotiation than as institutions representing public interests. This situation widens the gap between procedural and substantive democracy, where elections are conducted according to the rule of law but fail to produce responsive, inclusive, and public-interest governments.

Thus, this research confirms that strengthening local democracy requires more fundamental reforms to political party institutions. Without strengthening cadre

development, ideological consistency, internal transparency, and a reorientation of parties toward the public interest, local democracy will continue to be trapped in electoral proceduralism that lacks substance and is vulnerable to being reproduced by elite interests.

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