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The Middle Path of Electoral Democracy: Direct Local Elections, Political Party Institutionalization, and the Local Democratic Deficit in Indonesia

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Abstrak

Demokrasi elektoral Indonesia kerap dikritik dengan menempatkan pilkada langsung sebagai sumber utama disfungsi demokrasi lokal. Artikel ini menolak pandangan tersebut dengan menganalisis defisit demokrasi elektoral melalui relasi antara pilkada langsung dan tingkat institusionalisasi partai politik. Pilkada langsung merupakan capaian normatif reformasi demokrasi yang menegaskan kedaulatan rakyat dan memperluas partisipasi politik lokal. Namun, mekanisme ini beroperasi dalam lingkungan kelembagaan yang lemah, ditandai oleh rendahnya akuntabilitas partai, fragmentasi representasi, politik biaya tinggi, dan personalisasi kekuasaan. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif berbasis kajian literatur sistematis dengan kerangka institusionalisasi partai Randall dan Svåsand, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa defisit demokrasi elektoral tidak bersumber dari mekanisme pemilihan langsung, melainkan dari lemahnya kapasitas institusional partai politik. Artikel ini mengajukan jalan tengah demokrasi elektoral dengan mempertahankan pilkada langsung seraya memperkuat institusionalisasi partai sebagai prasyarat demokrasi konstitusional yang substantif dan akuntabel.

Kata kunci: demokrasi elektoral, demokrasi konstitusional, institusionalisasi partai politik, kedaulatan rakyat, pilkada langsung

Abstract

Indonesia's electoral democracy is frequently criticized by framing direct local executive elections as the primary cause of democratic dysfunction at the local level. This article challenges this view by analyzing electoral democratic deficits through the relationship between direct elections and political party institutionalization. Direct local elections constitute a normative and constitutional achievement of democratic reform, reinforcing popular sovereignty and political

participation. However, they operate within a weak institutional setting characterized by limited party accountability, fragmented representation, high-cost electoral competition, and the personalization of power. Drawing on a qualitative systematic literature review and the party institutionalization framework proposed by Randall and Svåsand, this study demonstrates that Indonesia's electoral democratic deficit does not stem from the mechanism of direct elections itself, but from the limited institutional capacity of political parties to perform representative, leadership recruitment, and accountability functions. The article advances the concept of a middle path of electoral democracy that preserves direct elections while strengthening party institutionalization as a prerequisite for substantive, accountable, and sustainable constitutional democracy.

Keywords: Electoral Democracy, Constitutional Democracy, Party Institutionalization, Popular Sovereignty, Direct Local Elections

Introduction

Direct local elections as an instrument of popular sovereignty do not constitute the principal problem of local democracy in Indonesia; rather, the fundamental issue lies in the weak institutionalization of political parties. Political parties have yet to perform optimally their core functions of representation, leadership recruitment, and political accountability. Although direct local elections have restored citizens' political rights and increased electoral participation at the local level, this mechanism operates within a political institutional environment that remains insufficiently institutionalized. Consequently, the rise in electoral participation does not automatically translate into effective and accountable political representation.

Historically, direct local elections emerged as one of the major achievements of post-1998 political reform, marking a transition from authoritarian centralism toward broader recognition of popular sovereignty through decentralization and democratization at the local level (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2010; Buehler, 2013). This reform not only reconfigured the relationship between the central and local governments but also expanded citizens' political participation by enabling them to directly determine local political leadership without mediation by central or local political elites.

The normative framework of constitutional democracy posits that direct local elections function as a mechanism to strengthen the legitimacy and accountability of local power through mandates granted directly by the people, operating within the constraints of the rule of law and constitutional limitations on authority (Elster, 1998; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018). In the post-reform

period, Indonesia has followed a trajectory similar to other new democracies emerging from authoritarian rule such as Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines, which adopted direct local elections at the local level as a strategy to deepen democracy and limit the dominance of entrenched elites. However, comparative democratic scholarship emphasizes that the expansion of electoral mechanisms does not automatically produce high-quality democracy unless it is supported by well-institutionalized political institutions (Merkel, 2004).

Empirically, voter turnout in Indonesia's direct local elections since their introduction in 2005 through the simultaneous elections of 2024 shows a general upward trend, although fluctuations across electoral cycles and regional variations remain evident. Official reports from the General Elections Commission of the Republic of Indonesia and academic studies indicate that voter participation in local elections has generally remained at majority levels and has increased in several cycles of simultaneous elections, particularly following the consolidation of local electoral design (Arif, 2020; KPU RI, 2016, 2021). These data suggest that direct local elections function relatively effectively as a mechanism of procedural democracy, even though the quality of political representation and accountability continues to display significant limitations.

More than two decades after reform, Indonesia's electoral democracy continues to face structural challenges, including low public trust in political parties, the persistence of vote buying, intensifying elite pragmatism, and the high costs of electoral competition (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Fossati et al., 2020). Electoral contestation at the local level frequently shifts from programmatic and policy-based competition toward the personalization of power, patronage mobilization, and short-term political transactions. These dynamics weaken the representative function of political institutions and widen the gap between electoral processes and governmental performance, thereby gradually eroding democratic legitimacy in the public sphere (Hadiz, 2021; Mietzner, 2020).

This situation has generated at least three major strands of academic debate and policy discourse concerning the future of direct local elections in Indonesia. The first emphasizes fiscal efficiency and political stability. From this perspective, direct local elections are viewed as a source of budgetary waste and local governmental instability, leading to proposals to restrict the mechanism or to return the selection of local executives to regional legislatures (Buehler,

2013; Mietzner, 2015). The second strand highlights the problem of high-cost politics and the consolidation of local oligarchies. Expensive electoral competition is seen to encourage patronage practices, post-election corruption, and transactional relationships between local executives and regional legislative elites (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2020; Hadiz, 2021). The third strand focuses on political party institutionalization, emphasizing weak organizational capacity, underdeveloped cadre formation systems, and limited internal accountability. From this perspective, weak party institutionalization constitutes a central factor underlying the low quality of electoral democracy (Randall & Svåsand, 2002; Ufen, 2022).

While these strands offer important insights, they remain analytically fragmented in explaining the relationship between direct local elections, the quality of local democracy, and party institutionalization. Critiques of direct local elections frequently culminate in normatively problematic solutions that risk undermining the principle of popular sovereignty. At the same time, analyses of high-cost politics and local oligarchy often stop at structural diagnosis without proposing an alternative democratic design. Conversely, studies on party institutionalization have not been fully integrated into debates on how electoral mechanisms operate within the broader institutional context of local democracy.

Building on this gap, this article advances an analytical framework that integrates democratic theory, constitutional democracy, and party institutionalization to explain the dynamics of local democratic deficits in Indonesia. Its principal theoretical contribution is the argument that the quality of Indonesia's electoral democracy is determined not merely by the continued operation of direct local elections as a procedural mechanism, but by the institutional capacity of political parties to convert electoral participation into substantive political representation and accountability. Accordingly, the article proposes a middle path of electoral democracy that preserves direct local elections as a normative principle of constitutional democracy while positioning the strengthening of party institutionalization as a prerequisite for substantive, accountable, and equitable local democracy.

Theoretical Framework

Constitutional Democracy and the Limits of Procedural Democracy

The perspective of constitutional democracy constitutes the primary theoretical foundation of this article. It views democracy not merely as an electoral mechanism for producing legitimate government, but as a system of power that is legally constrained and institutionally accountable. Within this framework, political legitimacy derived from the people must operate under the rule of law, limitations on authority, and the protection of citizens' rights, while ensuring sustainable mechanisms of accountability (Elster, 1998; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018).

Elections, including direct local elections, are therefore not the ultimate goal of democracy but rather the initial gateway to the exercise of power that is subject to law, oversight institutions, and constitutional norms. From this standpoint, the core problem of local democracy in Indonesia does not stem from the failure of direct electoral mechanisms. Instead, it arises from the weakness of political institutions that mediate the relationship between popular sovereignty and the exercise of governmental authority.

In modern democratic theory, the concept of polyarchy emphasizes two central dimensions of democracy: inclusive political participation and open political competition. In the context of elections and local executive elections in Indonesia, these dimensions provide an important normative basis for evaluating procedural democracy. Direct local elections meet the minimal standards of polyarchy by expanding citizens' access to participation and providing a relatively open arena for elite competition. The concept clarifies who may participate and how political competition is structured. However, this framework remains largely neutral with regard to the quality of representation and the effectiveness of intermediary institutions. It offers limited insight into how power is exercised after elections, how elected representatives are held accountable, and how public interests are collectively articulated and implemented through political institutions. In post-authoritarian settings, this limitation becomes particularly significant, as political institutions are often insufficiently consolidated.

Joseph A. Schumpeter advances the discussion by reducing democracy to an institutional method for selecting leaders through electoral competition among elites (Schumpeter, 1942).

This procedural conception of democracy provides stability and procedural certainty, yet it inherently confines the role of citizens to periodic electoral participation. In this framework, the public is positioned primarily as a grantor of mandates, while substantive decision-making authority resides in the hands of elected elites. In the context of post-authoritarian developing states such as Indonesia, this approach may secure formal electoral legitimacy, but it carries risks in terms of accountability, the rule of law, and institutional control (Merkel, 2004). Procedural democracy ensures that local elections can be conducted competitively, yet it tends to overlook the strengthening of intermediary institutions required to guarantee that power is exercised in the public interest.

Delegative Democracy and the Institutional Problem of Local Democracy

The most influential critique of procedural reductionism in democracy was advanced by Guillermo O'Donnell through the concept of delegative democracy. In this typology, O'Donnell (1994; 1998) argues that many new democracies have succeeded in conducting competitive elections but have failed to establish effective mechanisms of institutional oversight (O'Donnell, 1994; O'Donnell, 1998). Electoral legitimacy is not converted into governance grounded in the rule of law and institutional checks and balances. Instead, it often becomes the basis for personalized and concentrated forms of executive power.

In delegative democracies, elected local executives tend to interpret their electoral mandate as direct authorization from the people to govern with minimal institutional constraints. The relationship between leaders and citizens becomes immediate and plebiscitary in nature, while representative institutions, political parties, and oversight bodies are relegated to secondary roles and frequently portrayed as obstacles to effective governance. As a result, horizontal accountability becomes weak and institutional control mechanisms erode.

Recent scholarship adopting the delegative democracy perspective suggests that direct local elections in Indonesia operate within an institutional environment that remains insufficiently consolidated. Regional legislatures are often fragmented due to the open-list proportional representation system, which encourages individualized competition. At the same time, political parties' function with relatively weak organizational and ideological capacity (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Fossati et al., 2020). In many instances, local executives construct

their political legitimacy through patronage networks and personal popularity rather than through institutionalized party programs or coherent policy platforms. This pattern is further exacerbated by weak internal party mechanisms for disciplining cadres and public officials (Power & Warburton, 2020; Prianto, 2024).

Under these conditions, direct local elections conducted within a fragile institutional setting risk reproducing patterns of delegative democracy at the local level. The relationship between citizens and leaders becomes highly personalized and confined to the electoral moment, without effective mediation by strong and accountable political institutions. Citizens exercise sovereignty during elections but lack adequate mechanisms of control once the electoral process concludes. The central problem of local democracy in Indonesia, therefore, does not lie in the failure of direct electoral mechanisms, but in the institutional failure of political parties. Political parties have not consistently fulfilled their core functions of representation, leadership recruitment, and political accountability (Rahman & Triadi, 2024).

Political Party Institutionalization and the Middle Path of Democracy

In a constitutional democracy, political parties serve as key institutions linking popular sovereignty to the exercise of state power. Sartori (1976) argues that modern democracy cannot function without political parties, as they constitute the primary channels for interest articulation, demand aggregation, and leadership recruitment (Sartori, 1976). Wolinetz (2006) further demonstrate that transformations in party organization and orientation significantly affect the quality of representation and accountability in contemporary democracies (Wolinetz, 2006).

Democratic scholarship reveals a persistent theoretical tension in understanding the relationship between elections, legitimacy, and political institutions. Procedural theories of democracy, as articulated by Dahl and Schumpeter, emphasize competitive elections as the principal source of political legitimacy. In contrast, O'Donnell's critique of delegative democracy highlights the failure of political institutions to constrain executive power after elections (O'Donnell, 1994; O'Donnell, 1998). The constitutional democracy perspective calls for an integration of electoral legitimacy, the rule of law, and institutional accountability (Elster, 1998; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018). Recent studies underscore the importance of party institutionalization in

sustaining democratic quality. Raja Ganesa (2025) show that internal cohesion and organizational capacity influence leadership continuity (Ganesa, 2025), while van Biezen argue that weak value internalization and ideological grounding directly undermine public accountability, particularly in new democracies (Biezen, 2003).

The principal theoretical gap lies in the tendency of existing studies to position direct local elections and political parties in dichotomous terms. Critiques of electoral democracy often culminate in proposals that restrict popular participation, whereas institutional analyses of parties frequently stop at diagnosing organizational weakness without systematically linking it to the design of electoral democracy. To date, there is no comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates popular sovereignty through direct elections with the institutional responsibility of political parties as a prerequisite for substantive democracy (Arfandy & Maharani, 2024).

Randall and Svåsand (2002) propose four principal dimensions for assessing the level of party institutionalization: systemness, value infusion, decisional autonomy, and reification (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). These dimensions provide a comprehensive analytical framework for examining political parties both in terms of their internal organizational structures and their relationship with the broader political environment and society.

Table 1. Political Party Institutionalization (Randall & Svasand, 2002)

Dimension	Definition	Practical Indicators
Systemness	Organizational stability	Established rules, formalized nomination procedures
Value Infusion	Internalization of values and ideology	Clear party platform, cadre political education
Decisional Autonomy	Independence from external actors	Policy independence, autonomous candidate selection
Reification	Public legitimacy and societal recognition	Public perception of the party as a durable institution

Source: (Randall & Svasand, 2002)

The dimension of systemness refers to the degree of internal stability and organizational regularity within a political party. An institutionalized party is characterized by a functioning organizational structure, established rules, and formalized procedures in decision-making

processes, including mechanisms for political nomination. Such stability constitutes a prerequisite for consistent political behaviour and long-term organizational continuity (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

The dimension of value infusion concerns the extent to which values, ideology, and political objectives are internalized within the party. This internalization is reflected in the clarity of the party platform as well as the existence of sustained cadre formation and political education processes. Through this dimension, the party is understood as a normative organization that advances a coherent set of ideas, rather than merely serving as an instrument of electoral competition (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

The dimension of decisional autonomy refers to the capacity of political parties to maintain independence in decision-making from external actors. This autonomy encompasses the party's ability to determine its policy direction and candidate selection processes without being fully dictated by pressures from the state, financiers, or other non-party actors (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

The dimension of reification pertains to the level of public legitimacy and societal recognition of a political party as a concrete and enduring institution. Reification is reflected in the extent to which the party is perceived by the public as a stable and identifiable political actor whose existence transcends particular individuals or short-term interests. This dimension emphasizes the symbolic and cognitive aspects of a party's presence within the political system (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

This framework enables a systematic analysis of why political parties in Indonesia have not optimally fulfilled their representative and accountability functions. Recent research indicates that political parties tend to operate in pragmatic, transactional, and short-term ways, with the consequence that direct local elections remain arenas of popular participation but have not effectively fostered accountability or enhanced leadership quality (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Ufen, 2022).

Accordingly, the central problem of Indonesia's electoral democracy does not lie in direct local elections, but in the failure of political parties as intermediary institutions. The appropriate normative response therefore rests on strengthening the institutional capacity of political

parties so that they are able to manage electoral mandates in a responsible and accountable manner. The proposed middle path of electoral democracy rejects two opposing extremes: the abolition or restriction of direct local elections, which risks eroding popular sovereignty, and the uncritical celebration of electoral democracy that neglects the need for institutional reform. Sustainable democracy requires not only competitive elections but also institutionalized, autonomous, and accountable political parties, so that electoral legitimacy can be aligned with institutional capacity (Biezen, 2003; Ganesa, 2025).

Strengthening party institutionalization, therefore, is not merely an organizational strategy but a fundamental prerequisite for realizing a substantive, accountable, and sustainable democracy in Indonesia. Without strong and institutionalized political parties, popular sovereignty expressed through direct local elections will not translate into governance that is genuinely responsive and responsible.

Research Method

This article employs a qualitative approach with a theory-driven qualitative analysis design grounded in empirical secondary data. The approach is intended to explain structural patterns of local electoral democracy in Indonesia through an analytical synthesis between empirical findings in recent scholarship and the theoretical framework of party institutionalization (Meng et al., 2026). The analysis focuses on the relationship between direct local elections as a mechanism of popular sovereignty and the institutional capacity of political parties as intermediary democratic institutions.

The data were collected through a systematic literature review of relevant academic sources and official documents, including nationally and internationally reputable journal articles, academic books, statutory regulations, and official reports on electoral and local election evaluations. The selected literature was chosen based on its substantive relevance to issues of local political representation, leadership recruitment, party accountability, and the dynamics of post-reform electoral democracy.

The analysis proceeded through theory-informed empirical interpretation in two stages. In the first stage, the study identified dominant and recurring empirical patterns in the literature, including weak internal party accountability, fragmented representation resulting from

individualized electoral competition, the persistence of high-cost politics and transactional power relations, and limited party autonomy in candidate nomination processes. In the second stage, these empirical patterns were conceptually analyzed using Randall and Svåsand's party institutionalization framework (Randall & Svåsand, 2002), encompassing the dimensions of systemness, value infusion, decisional autonomy, and reification, in order to explain their relationship to the quality of electoral democracy and the realization of popular sovereignty at the local level (Roine et al., 2024).

This methodological approach enables the study to move beyond normative description or procedural critique of direct local elections by situating the problem of electoral democracy within the institutional design of political parties (Travis et al., 2014). It therefore provides a coherent analytical foundation for formulating the conceptual synthesis of a middle path of electoral democracy, which preserves direct local elections as a normative principle of constitutional democracy while emphasizing the strengthening of party institutionalization as a prerequisite for substantive democracy.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and does not aim to produce statistical generalization. Nevertheless, the analytical approach is considered adequate for explaining structural dynamics and institutional implications of Indonesia's electoral democracy within a systematic theoretical framework.

Result and Discussion

Analysis of recent academic literature, election monitoring reports, and empirical studies on local democracy in Indonesia indicates that the principal challenges of electoral democracy are structural and institutional rather than merely technical issues related to the administration of elections. Comparative studies and contemporary analyses of Indonesia consistently demonstrate that direct local elections operate within a political institutional context that remains insufficiently consolidated, particularly with regard to political parties as the primary intermediary institutions between popular sovereignty and state power (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Ufen, 2022). This findings section is organized into four principal themes that represent dominant empirical patterns in Indonesia's local democracy, while also clarifying their causal relationships and institutional implications for the quality of electoral democracy.

1. Weak Internal Accountability of Political Parties

The first finding indicates that political parties in Indonesia have not developed as collectively accountable organizations in the process of leadership recruitment. Empirical research over the past five years consistently shows that nomination mechanisms for legislative candidates and local executive candidates remain dominated by decisions made by central or local party elites, with minimal transparency and limited participation of party cadres (Ufen, 2022; Ulum, 2020). Ufen (2022) further demonstrates that most political parties in Indonesia lack binding institutionalized candidacy rules, rendering nomination processes highly susceptible to informal negotiation and pragmatic considerations (Ufen, 2022). This finding is reinforced by Mietzner (2020), who argues that party organizational weakening has become increasingly evident in the post-reform period, alongside the intensification of political personalization and parties' growing reliance on popular non-cadre figures (Mietzner, 2020).

The causal relationship emerging from these findings suggests that the absence of stable organizational procedures encourages the personalization of political decision-making and undermines long-term cadre development. Candidate selection is frequently determined not by ideological track record, organizational experience, or leadership capacity, but by proximity to party elites and the ability to mobilize resources. Within Randall and Svåsand's framework, this condition reflects a low level of systemness, characterized by weak organizational stability and the limited functioning of formal rules as authoritative references in decision-making (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

The institutional implications of weak systemness include diminished accountability of elected candidates to both the party organization and voters. When nomination processes are not grounded in clear institutional mechanisms, political parties lose their capacity to enforce internal discipline and maintain policy consistency. Under such conditions, parties tend to function as pragmatic electoral vehicles rather than as institutions of democratic representation and leadership development. Over time, this dynamic hampers political leadership regeneration and deepens the legitimacy crisis of political parties (Mietzner, 2020; Ufen, 2022).

The persistence of corruption among elected officials further illustrates the institutional consequences of weak party accountability. KPK records demonstrate that corruption cases

have involved political officeholders across various levels of government and political parties, suggesting that corruption is not confined to individual misconduct but reflects structural weaknesses in political recruitment and internal accountability (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, 2023). These patterns reinforce Randall and Svåsand's concept of systemness, whereby the absence of stable organizational procedures weakens parties' ability to discipline political elites and maintain consistent standards of public accountability (Randall & Svåsand, 2002).

2. Fragmented Representation under the Open-List Proportional System

The second finding concerns the fragmentation of political representation in regional legislatures (DPRD) as a consequence of the open-list proportional representation system. Empirical literature indicates that this system generates intense individualized competition among candidates, including within the same political party, thereby shifting political orientation from strengthening party platforms toward personalized electoral strategies (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2020). Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) demonstrate that in the context of Indonesian local politics, individualized electoral competition weakens the programmatic linkage between political parties and their representatives (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Members of regional legislatures are more inclined to cultivate personal support bases through clientelist networks rather than advancing collective party policy agendas.

Official political statistics also demonstrate the persistence of Indonesia's fragmented multiparty system. The Political Statistics 2024 published by Statistics Indonesia (BPS), based on official KPU data, records the continued dispersion of parliamentary seats among numerous political parties following the 2024 elections. Such fragmentation encourages coalition bargaining and individualized legislative behaviour rather than cohesive party-based representation, thereby reducing the effectiveness of legislative oversight over executive power (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). The dispersion of parliamentary seats across numerous political parties increases coalition bargaining costs and weakens legislative cohesion, making collective oversight over executive authorities substantially more difficult.

The resulting causal dynamic suggests that individualized competition undermines internal party cohesion and weakens factional discipline within regional legislative bodies. As a result, regional legislatures increasingly function as arenas for the aggregation of individual interests

rather than as representative institutions capable of formulating coordinated and long-term public policy. From the perspective of constitutional democracy, such fragmentation diminishes the capacity of regional legislatures to serve as effective oversight and balancing institutions vis-à-vis local executive power (Buehler, 2013; Mietzner, 2020).

The institutional implication of fragmented representation is the degradation of political representation from a programmatic model toward an increasingly personalistic pattern. The linkage between voters' electoral choices and policy accountability becomes blurred, as political decisions are less clearly attributable to political parties. Over time, this condition weakens democratic accountability and expands opportunities for transactional arrangements between local executives and legislative actors.

3. High-Cost Politics and Transactional Power Relations

The third finding indicates that fragmented representation is closely intertwined with the intensification of high-cost politics in local electoral competition. Recent empirical studies consistently show that individualized competition in both direct local elections and legislative elections compels candidates to incur substantial political expenditures, whether for campaign purposes or to secure party endorsement (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) argue that vote buying and patronage are not merely individual behavioural deviations but constitute part of the structural logic of electoral competition (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Candidates who incur significant political costs face strong incentives to recoup their investments after election, often through the misuse of public authority and the formation of transactional relationships with regional legislatures. Official data further indicate that the financial costs of contesting local elections in Indonesia are exceptionally high. A joint study conducted by the Corruption Eradication Commission and the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2020 estimated that prospective regents or mayors must prepare approximately IDR 20–30 billion, while gubernatorial candidates may require between IDR 20–100 billion in simultaneous elections during the 2015–2018 period. These figures far exceed the average declared assets of candidates as reported in official wealth disclosure statements (Ingguan & Lutfi, 2020).

Such financial burdens increase candidates' dependence on external sponsors and financiers, thereby reinforcing vote-buying practices and transactional relationships between candidates and funding actors. This dependency heightens the risk of conflicts of interest in post-election governance.

The causal relationship between high-cost politics and post-election corruption is further reinforced by weak oversight institutions and low internal party cohesion. High-cost politics emerges from the interaction between an individualized electoral design and weak party institutionalization. The institutional consequences include heightened vulnerability to systemic corruption and the erosion of legislative oversight functions. Relations between local executives and regional legislatures tend to become pragmatic and transactional, resulting in public policies that reflect elite compromise rather than broader societal interests. Under these conditions, electoral democracy fails to evolve into substantive democracy. Under these conditions, electoral democracy fails to evolve into substantive democracy because recovering campaign expenditures becomes a rational political incentive for elected officials. Dependence on financiers and the need to compensate electoral investments create structural opportunities for corruption, rent-seeking, and patronage after elections, even when elections are conducted in a direct and competitive manner (Mietzner, 2020).

This tendency is reflected in a series of corruption cases involving regional heads investigated by Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi/KPK) throughout 2026 (Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, 2023). The Mayor of Madiun, Maidi, was named a suspect for alleged extortion and gratuities related to government infrastructure projects. The Regent of Pati, Sudewo, was implicated in an alleged extortion scheme involving the appointment of village officials and was also linked to a separate corruption case concerning a railway construction project. The Regent of Rejang Lebong, Muhammad Fikri Thobari, was accused of accepting bribes connected to infrastructure projects. Likewise, the Regent of Cilacap, Syamsul Auliya Rachman, and the Regent of Tulungagung, Gatut Sunu Wibowo, were investigated for allegedly extorting local government officials. Meanwhile, the Regent of Muara Enim, Edison, was accused of bribery related to public financial audits and procurement projects. The Regent of Kuantan Singingi, Suhardiman Amby, allegedly collected illicit payments in connection with the proposed release of a protected forest area. In addition,

the Regent of Langkat, Syah Afandin, was charged with accepting bribes related to infrastructure projects and receiving illegal gratuities associated with bureaucratic appointments, the selection of school principals, and the procurement of school uniforms

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that the abuse of public office following elections extends far beyond corruption in public procurement. It also encompasses the sale of public positions, bureaucratic extortion, bribery, and the manipulation of administrative authority for private gain. The recurrence of these patterns indicates that post-electoral corruption in Indonesia is not merely the result of individual misconduct but also reflects broader structural incentives embedded within local governance and political institutions. These cases provide empirical support for the argument that high-cost electoral competition and weak institutional accountability create favorable conditions for rent-seeking behavior and the misuse of public authority after elections.

4. Weak Party Autonomy in Candidate Endorsement

The fourth finding underscores the weakness of party decisional autonomy in the endorsement process of local executive candidates. Recent studies indicate that party endorsements are frequently shaped by pressures from financiers, local elites, and short-term considerations of electability, while criteria such as integrity, leadership capacity, and programmatic commitment receive comparatively limited attention (Ufen, 2022; Ulum, 2020). The practice commonly described as political dowry in the process of securing party endorsement constitutes one of the factors that escalate the overall cost of local elections. Candidates are often required to provide substantial financial contributions in order to obtain party backing, despite the fact that such practices are formally prohibited under electoral regulations.

The identifiable causal dynamic lies in parties' dependence on external resources, rooted in weak organizational foundations and insufficient internal funding mechanisms. This dependence blurs the boundary between public interest and private gain in the nomination process and erodes the party's role as a democratic gatekeeper. Within Randall and Svåsand's framework, this condition reflects a low level of decisional autonomy, as party decision-making becomes vulnerable to external financial and political influence. The institutional implication of

weak decisional autonomy is a decline in public legitimacy. When political parties are perceived as easily transacted institutions, a deeper crisis of reification emerges, and parties fail to be recognized as stable and credible political institutions capable of representing broader societal interests (Randall & Svåsand, 2002; Ufen, 2022).

The institutional consequences of weak decisional autonomy extend beyond candidate selection to the broader legitimacy of political parties themselves. National surveys consistently demonstrate that political parties remain among the least trusted democratic institutions in Indonesia. A longitudinal survey conducted by Indikator Politik Indonesia reported that political parties consistently occupied one of the lowest positions in public trust among major political institutions, while Poltracking Indonesia likewise found political parties to be the least trusted institution compared with other democratic institutions. These findings indicate that Indonesian political parties continue to experience difficulties in establishing durable institutional legitimacy despite regular electoral competition. Within Randall and Svåsand's framework (Randall & Svåsand, 2002), such conditions reflect weaknesses in reification, whereby political parties have not yet been fully recognized by citizens as stable, credible, and enduring democratic institutions (Indikator Politik Indonesia, 2016; Poltracking Indonesia, 2017).

Taken together, these four findings demonstrate that Indonesia's electoral democratic deficit does not originate from direct local elections as a mechanism of popular sovereignty, but from the weakness of political institutions, particularly political parties, in managing electoral competition and post-election governance. These findings provide the empirical and conceptual foundation for advancing the proposed middle path of electoral democracy, which preserves direct local elections while strengthening party institutionalization as a prerequisite for constitutional and substantive democracy.

Electoral Democracy and the Institutional Problem of Local Democracy

The present analysis clarifies that the deficit of electoral democracy at the local level must be understood as a structural problem rooted in institutional configuration rather than merely as a technical failure in electoral administration. In this context, direct local elections function relatively effectively as a mechanism of procedural democracy, yet they operate within an institutional environment that has not been able to convert electoral participation and legitimacy

into accountable political representation. This pattern is consistent with scholarship on post-authoritarian democracies, which suggests that electoral competition, in the absence of well-institutionalized intermediary institutions, tends to produce democracies of uneven quality (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Merkel, 2004).

From the perspective of constitutional democracy, the gap between electoral legitimacy and substantive accountability reflects weak integration between electoral procedures and mechanisms of power control. Direct local elections provide a popular mandate, but such a mandate does not automatically generate responsive governance when the institutions mediating the relationship between citizens and rulers fail to function effectively. The problem of local democracy is therefore more accurately understood as an institutional failure in managing and constraining power generated through elections (Noer, 2025).

The analysis reveals a sequential institutional mechanism explaining how weak party institutionalization generates democratic deficits. Weak institutionalization constrains merit-based candidate recruitment and weakens internal accountability. These deficiencies encourage increasingly personalized electoral competition and costly political campaigns, strengthening dependence on financiers and patronage networks. Simultaneously, fragmented legislatures and declining party cohesion weaken horizontal accountability. Consequently, electoral legitimacy generated through direct local elections cannot be effectively transformed into accountable governance. Electoral democratic deficits therefore emerge not from direct elections themselves but from weak intermediary political institutions

The empirical implications of these findings are evident in the role of political parties in candidate nomination and oversight of elected officials. Weak internal party accountability reflects low levels of systemness and decisional autonomy as conceptualized by Randall and Svåsand (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). In practice, political parties in Indonesia more frequently operate as pragmatic electoral vehicles than as stable, programmatically oriented representative organizations (Ufen, 2022; Ulum, 2020). This condition limits their capacity to demand policy consistency and public accountability from the local executives they endorse, thereby weakening the institutional control dimension of electoral legitimacy.

Fragmented representation in regional legislatures further intensifies this problem. The open-list proportional system encourages individualized intra-party competition, weakening factional cohesion and reducing the effectiveness of legislative oversight. Within a constitutional democratic framework, such fragmentation undermines local checks and balances and obscures lines of political responsibility between executive and legislative branches (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Fossati et al., 2020). As a result, inter-institutional relations at the local level tend to become transactional rather than deliberative.

These dynamics also help explain the entrenchment of high-cost politics and patronage practices in local elections. Vote buying and post-election transactional arrangements cannot be reduced to individual ethical shortcomings but should be understood as structural consequences of electoral competition that is not supported by adequately institutionalized political parties (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2020; Berenschot, 2018). In such an environment, direct local elections tend to reinforce the personalization of power, not because of their direct character per se, but due to the absence of effective institutional constraints.

O'Donnell's framework of delegative democracy provides a relevant conceptual lens for interpreting these findings. Strong electoral legitimacy, when not balanced by effective institutional oversight, creates space for the concentration of power in local executive figures and weakens horizontal accountability (O'Donnell, 1994; O'Donnell, 1998). In the context of Indonesia's local democracy, the direct relationship between leaders and voters is often insufficiently mediated by effective political institutions, thereby encouraging personalized governance patterns and narrowing the scope of democratic control.

These institutional weaknesses generate broader democratic consequences. First, weak party institutionalization contributes to the emergence of political leaders whose legitimacy is primarily based on popularity and financial resources rather than organizational competence and programmatic commitment. Second, high-cost electoral competition increases incentives for corruption and patronage as elected officials seek to recover campaign expenditures after assuming office (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Third, fragmented legislatures and weak party discipline diminish the effectiveness of constitutional checks and balances, thereby reinforcing delegative patterns of governance. Collectively, these institutional dynamics widen the gap between procedural electoral legitimacy and substantive democratic accountability.

The Middle Path of Electoral Democracy: Integrating Legitimacy and Institutions

Engaging in dialogue with the theories of Dahl, Schumpeter, and O'Donnell, he present analysis indicates that the principal problem of Indonesia's electoral democracy lies in democratic governance rather than in the existence of direct elections themselves (O'Donnell, 1994; Schumpeter, 1942). Direct local elections meet the minimal standards of procedural democracy as articulated by Dahl (1971), yet they have not been adequately integrated with sustained mechanisms of accountability that constitute the core of constitutional democracy. Existing scholarship generally explains Indonesia's democratic problems through two competing perspectives. One attributes democratic decline to direct local elections by emphasizing campaign costs, vote buying, and political dynasties (Buehler, 2013; Mietzner, 2015). The other emphasizes organizational weaknesses within political parties without systematically integrating them into debates concerning electoral institutions (Prianto, 2024; Ufen, 2022). This article integrates these two perspectives by demonstrating that direct elections generate democratic deficits only when mediated by weakly institutionalized political parties. Accordingly, the proposed Middle Path of Electoral Democracy shifts the analytical focus from electoral procedures toward institutional capacity. Unlike previous studies that either criticize direct local elections or focus exclusively on political party organization, this study demonstrates that democratic deficits emerge through the interaction between electoral institutions and weak party institutionalization. This interaction constitutes the principal conceptual novelty of the proposed Middle Path of Electoral Democracy. Its principal theoretical contribution lies in reconciling popular sovereignty with institutional accountability rather than treating them as competing democratic objectives. Schumpeter's critique regarding the limited role of citizens after elections becomes particularly relevant when intermediary institutions fail to perform their function of constraining power effectively (Merkel, 2004; Schumpeter, 1942).

Randall and Svasand's theory of party institutionalization provides the analytical foundation for articulating a middle path of electoral democracy (Randall & Svåsand, 2002). This middle path does not frame direct local elections and political stability as mutually exclusive objectives, but rather as agendas that must be institutionally integrated. Direct local elections are maintained as the normative expression of popular sovereignty, while the strengthening of

party institutionalization is understood as a prerequisite for converting electoral legitimacy into policy accountability and substantive governance quality.

The theoretical implication of these findings is the need to shift the focus of debate away from the dichotomy of direct versus indirect elections and toward the question of institutional capacity in mediating electoral democracy (Andrias et al., 2025). The middle path of electoral democracy rejects two opposing extremes: the abolition of direct local elections, which risks undermining citizens' political rights, and the romanticization of electoral democracy that overlooks institutional deficiencies. Sustainable local democracy requires the integration of inclusive electoral competition with political institutions that are institutionalized, autonomous, and accountable.

The proposed Middle Path of Electoral Democracy therefore provides the basis for what may be termed an institution-conscious model of democracy, in which electoral legitimacy must be mediated by strong intermediary political institutions capable of transforming electoral mandates into accountable democratic governance

Policy Implications: Political Party Reform as a Constitutional Democratic Agenda

The policy implications formulated in this section are derived directly from the middle path of electoral democracy developed in this article. This approach rejects reductionist perspectives that position direct local elections as the primary source of local democratic dysfunction, while also rejecting the romanticizing of electoral procedures that overlook the quality of intermediary institutions. Within an institution-conscious conception of democracy, the quality of local democracy is determined by the extent to which political parties, as primary representative institutions, are able to convert broad electoral participation into meaningful political representation and sustained accountability of power (Antonio, 2023). Accordingly, the policy implications of these findings consistently point toward institutional reform of political parties rather than toward altering the design of direct local elections or restricting citizens' voting rights.

**Table 2. Policy Implications of the Middle Path of Democracy Based on Party
Institutionalization Dimensions**

Dimension of Institutionalization	Core Problem	Policy Implications	Constitutional Democratic Objective
Systemness	Non-standardized, elitist, and transactional nomination procedures	Standardization of internal party regulations, particularly in the selection of legislative and local executive candidates; mandatory tiered and written selection mechanisms	Strengthening internal accountability and ensuring merit-based political recruitment
Value Infusion	Weak ideological and programmatic orientation	Strengthening cadre development and sustained political education grounded in constitutional democratic values	Enhancing the quality of representation and differentiation of political choices
Decisional Autonomy	Dependence on financiers and local elites	Political finance reform, transparency of funding sources, public audits, and performance-based state subsidies	Reducing high-cost politics and reinforcing party independence
Reification	Low public trust in political parties	Repositioning parties as programmatic representative institutions through transparency and policy consistency	Restoring party legitimacy and public trust

Source: Author's own analysis.

First, reforming internal party nomination mechanisms constitutes a fundamental prerequisite for improving the quality of electoral democracy within the framework of the middle path approach. Candidate selection represents the initial point at which popular

sovereignty is mediated by intermediary institutions. When this process is conducted in a closed, elitist, and transactional manner, distortions of representation occur even before voters cast their ballots. Public policy should therefore promote the standardization of transparent, participatory, and binding internal nomination procedures through mandatory written selection rules and tiered mechanisms within political parties (Leo et al., 2023). Such reform directly strengthens party systemness and limits the dominance of top elites in candidate determination, ensuring that direct local elections no longer serve as arenas that legitimize candidates produced through weak institutional processes.

Second, transparency and accountability in political finance must be positioned as key instruments for strengthening party decisional autonomy. Within the middle path framework, high-cost politics is not treated as an inherent consequence of direct local elections but as a symptom of weak institutional independence within political parties. Dependence on external funding sources, whether from candidates, financiers, or oligarchic networks, undermines party autonomy in decision-making. Strengthened political finance regulation, mandatory public audits, and effective sanctions should be understood as institutional interventions aimed at restoring parties' function as democratic gatekeepers (Ivanauskienė, 2025). Increased public funding may be considered as a policy trade-off, provided that it is strictly linked to institutional performance indicators and compliance with internal procedural standards.

Third, cadre development and political education should be repositioned as core party functions in order to reinforce value infusion. Weak internalization of values, ideology, and policy orientation helps explain the tendency of parties to rely on popular non-cadre figures while neglecting long-term leadership development. Public policy should encourage the development of tiered and sustained cadre formation systems that cultivate constitutional democratic values, public ethics, and policy formulation capacity (Widodo & Kristiyono, 2025). Within the middle path perspective, strengthening cadre development not only enhances leadership quality but also serves as an institutional mechanism to limit the personalization of power and overreliance on electoral capital.

Fourth, repositioning political parties as programmatic representative institutions is essential for restoring reification and public trust. When parties fail to articulate coherent ideological identities and consistent policy agendas, electoral competition is reduced to personal

rivalry among candidates. Policies that incentivize ideological differentiation and policy clarity among parties can sharpen voters' choices and reinforce the linkage between electoral support and policy accountability after elections. In the middle path framework, restoring party legitimacy is understood as a prerequisite for sustaining direct local elections themselves.

Overall, these policy implications underscore that reform of Indonesia's electoral democracy should not be directed toward restricting or abolishing direct local elections. Instead, reform efforts must focus on strengthening the political institutions that mediate popular sovereignty. The middle path of electoral democracy demonstrates that direct local elections and party institutionalization are not competing agendas, but mutually reinforcing prerequisites for achieving substantive, accountable, and sustainable constitutional democracy.

Conclusion

This article argues that the deficit of electoral democracy in Indonesia stems from the weak institutionalization of political parties in mediating, converting, and holding accountable the popular sovereignty expressed through direct local elections. Within this framework, direct local elections are understood as a normative, constitutional, and historical achievement of democratic reform that affirms the people as the ultimate source of political legitimacy. Framing direct elections as the primary cause of local democratic dysfunction, and using that diagnosis to justify restrictions on citizens' voting rights, constitutes a normatively premature and diagnostically flawed policy response.

Through empirical and conceptual analysis grounded in a theory-informed interpretation of secondary findings, this study demonstrates that Indonesia's electoral democracy continues to operate within a form of procedural formalism insufficiently supported by well-institutionalized political institutions. Weak systemness, value infusion, decisional autonomy, and reification within political parties render electoral competition more susceptible to personalization of power, high-cost politics, and post-election transactional arrangements. These dynamics ultimately erode local governmental accountability. The core issue, therefore, is not who elects local leaders, but how citizens' political preferences are produced, mediated, and institutionally constrained.

On this basis, the article advances the middle path of electoral democracy as both a theoretical and normative contribution to the study of Indonesian democracy. This approach rejects the false dichotomy between direct democracy and representative democracy and affirms that popular sovereignty and institutional strengthening are not competing agendas but mutually reinforcing conditions. Direct local elections should be preserved as the principal instrument for expressing popular sovereignty, while political parties must be institutionally strengthened to function effectively as democratic gatekeepers in filtering leadership, articulating public interests, and ensuring sustained accountability.

Accordingly, the article conceptualizes institution-conscious democracy as the analytical articulation of this middle path in understanding and designing the future of Indonesian democracy. Substantive democracy cannot be achieved by retracting political rights into the hands of elites, but by ensuring that broad electoral participation is mediated by political institutions that are strong, transparent, and publicly trusted. Strengthening party institutionalization and safeguarding direct local elections therefore emerge as inseparable prerequisites for consolidating a sovereign, just, and sustainable constitutional democracy in Indonesia.

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