



# THE NEXUS BETWEEN ELECTORAL SYSTEMS AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: EVIDENCE FROM INDONESIA

Muhammad Khafid Ainul Yaqin<sup>1</sup>, Yaen Miftakhul Laily<sup>2</sup>, Ni Wayan Desi Budha Jayanti<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Departement of Public Administration, Universitas Yudharta Pasuruan, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Departement of Public Administration, Universitas Jember, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Departement of Public Administration, Universitas Negeri Manado, Indonesia

Email : khafid@yudharta.ac.id

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## Abstract :

*This study examines the relationship between electoral systems and democratic governance in Indonesia by analyzing the implementation of democratic principles in Indonesian elections. Using a literature review methodology, this research evaluates Indonesia's electoral system against four key elements of democratic elections: competitiveness, periodicity, inclusiveness, and definitiveness. The findings reveal that while Indonesia has established strong legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms for democratic elections, challenges remain in translating campaign intensity into meaningful voter engagement. The study demonstrates that Indonesia has successfully implemented periodic leadership transitions, maintains inclusive electoral processes through comprehensive legislation, and enables citizens to exercise informed electoral choices. However, low voter participation and limited impact of candidate programs on voter preferences indicate areas requiring improvement. This research contributes to understanding democratic governance in emerging democracies and provides practical recommendations for electoral system enhancement.*

**Keywords :** democratic governance, electoral system, Indonesia, political participation, election quality

## INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, numerous countries have transitioned to democracy and, despite obstacles and minor setbacks, most have maintained this status. Today, more countries conduct elections than ever before (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Importantly, most governments worldwide honor their international commitments to uphold human rights, more people can vote freely, and civil society and its leaders can mobilize and engage in dialogue with political leaders. Above all, democracy has produced a domino effect, growing and spreading across the planet (Reynolds, Reilly, & Ellis, 2008).

Democracy increasingly faces challenges from within, such as when political leaders refuse to respect election results or peacefully transfer power, which can lead to democratic backsliding (Powell, 2013). Voter apathy and distrust toward traditional political institutions, particularly political parties and politicians, drive citizens to seek alternative channels for dialogue and political engagement, supported by new technologies (Rahmatunnisa & Bainus, 2025).

Democracy is a frequently uttered word. However, the more it is



discussed, the more difficult it becomes to find examples of countries that perfectly fulfill democratic order (Chandra, Anggono, & Febrian, 2025). In Indonesia, the search for democratic ideals continues both in political system practice and academic study (Tshishonga, 2025). In the academic realm, numerous papers are thoroughly examined in various seminars, while books, articles, and speeches by experts and politicians have been published in scientific journals, newspapers, and magazines (Hanan, 2014). However, unlike other developing countries, the vibrant discussion about democratic systems in Indonesia is not because the nation or government is unfamiliar with democratic systems. On the contrary, Indonesia has extensively understood various democratic variants worldwide at the practical level of political system implementation, including liberal democracy, parliamentary democracy, and Pancasila democracy (Mietzner, 2020). Yet these democratic variants have failed to provide a national and state life order truly based on democratic values and principles in their truest sense (Mietzner, 2023).

Effective government means not only that policies made and implemented must align with the people's will (determined through democratic processes) and with the constitution, but must also be consistently implemented into reality according to what was decided (Sukmajati & Aspinall, 2023). Therefore, it is necessary to design a democratic political system capable of producing effective presidential government nationally, as well as effective local governments in realizing the people's will in accordance with the 1945 Constitution.

Overall, Indonesia's democracy quality over the past year has been relatively good compared to most other countries worldwide. According to the Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Indonesia falls into the "Flawed Democracy" category, ranking 52nd globally with a total score of 6.71 out of 10 (Norway ranks first with a score of 9.75). Indonesia's position is favorable as it scores above the global average in four of five variables: Electoral Process and Pluralism (7.92 versus 5.63), Government Functioning (7.86 versus 4.64), Political Participation (7.22 versus 5.39), and Civil Liberties (6.18 versus 5.37). Indonesia's weak position lies in the Political Culture variable with a score below the global average at 4.38 versus 5.38. According to Freedom in the World by Freedom House, Indonesia is categorized as "Partly Free" with a total score of 59 out of 100 (100 is the maximum score achieved only by Norway, Sweden, and Finland). In the Political Rights variable, Indonesia scores well above the global average at 30 versus 21.88. In the Civil Liberties variable, Indonesia scores poorly below the global average at 29 versus 33.83 (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019).

Examining several historical events of democracy in Indonesia, this study analyzes democratic governance progress in Indonesia through available data, presenting the development of democratic governance in Indonesia.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a literature review methodology to analyze

democratic governance in Indonesia's electoral system. According to Cooper (2016), literature review is a method for gathering information from various literature sources such as books, journals, and articles. The purpose of this method is to identify significant findings from previous studies and synthesize them into conclusions.

Data were collected from multiple sources including government reports, survey results from polling institutions, electoral commission documents, and academic publications. The analysis framework uses four key elements of democratic elections from Angelika Klein (2011) in Her Book "Concept and Principles of Democratic Governance and Accountability": competitive, periodic, inclusive, and definitive. These elements serve as theoretical foundations to assess the level of electoral democracy in Indonesia.

The study examines Indonesia's electoral history from independence to present, analyzing legal frameworks (particularly Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections), institutional mechanisms, voter behavior patterns, and democratic indicators from international organizations. Secondary data analysis includes survey results from Poltracking Indonesia and electoral reports from the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Competitiveness in Indonesian Elections**

To discuss democratic governance in the context of Indonesian elections, this study uses the elements of democratic elections from "Concept and Principles of Democratic Governance and Accountability" (Klein, 2011) as theoretical foundations to assess the extent of electoral democracy in Indonesia. The first element is competitiveness, meaning candidates must enjoy the freedom of speech, assembly, and movement necessary to conduct their campaigns openly and to recommend alternative policies and candidates to voters.

A national survey conducted by Poltracking Indonesia during May 16-22, 2022, on "Projection of Strong Candidates for the 2024 Presidential Election" with 1,220 respondents produced the following findings: leadership characteristics important for presidential and vice-presidential candidates according to the public are caring and attentive to the people (16.8%), followed by honest, trustworthy, and corruption-free (16.0%), and experienced (12.7%). Regarding the background of presidential and vice-presidential candidate pairs, the public favors combinations of regional head and entrepreneur backgrounds (11.3%), regional head and regional head (10.3%), and regional head and minister (10.2%). In a simulation ballot with ten presidential candidate names, Ganjar Pranowo (26.9%), Prabowo Subianto (22.5%), and Anies Baswedan (16.8%) were the three candidates with electability above 10% (Poltracking Indonesia, 2022).

From the Poltracking survey results above, it can be understood that society still desires leaders who are caring and attentive to the people, honest, trustworthy, corruption-free, and experienced in governance. Furthermore,

Bawaslu released a campaign implementation report for the 2019 Election with the following findings: for voters, presidential candidate programs and ideas were not the main motivation in voting; candidates failed to translate public needs through vision and mission that the public remembered, even though 72.7% of the public complained about economic issues (basic commodity prices, employment) and social welfare (poverty, health, and environmental issues) as the nation's most pressing problems to solve (Poltracking Indonesia, 2022).

This indicates that candidate intensity in Indonesia does not have a major impact on voter preferences, resulting in low Indonesian public participation in democratic governance.

### **Periodic Leadership Transitions**

The second element of democratic elections is periodicity, meaning democracy does not elect presidents for life. Indonesia has changed presidents six times, and President Jokowi is currently the seventh President of the Republic of Indonesia. First, the Preparatory Committee for Indonesian Independence (PPKI) appointed Soekarno and Mohammad Hatta as the first President and Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia one day after the proclamation of independence (August 18, 1945). On July 5, 1959, Soekarno issued a Presidential Decree declaring the 1945 Constitution as the State Foundation, dissolving the Constituent Assembly and Parliament elected through elections and replacing them with the Mutual Cooperation Cabinet.

Second, following President Soekarno's administration, the MPRS appointed Soeharto as Acting President on March 12, 1967, and on March 27, 1968, Soeharto was appointed President according to the results of the MPRS General Session. During President Soeharto's 32-year leadership of Indonesia, six elections were held to elect members of the House of Representatives and Regional Representative Councils. Third, following President Soeharto's administration, Vice President B.J. Habibie was inaugurated as President of the Republic of Indonesia in 1998. During B.J. Habibie's administration, elections originally scheduled for 2002 were accelerated to 1999.

Fourth, Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Soekarnoputri were elected and appointed by the MPR RI as President and Vice President. Fifth, the Abdurrahman Wahid-Megawati Soekarnoputri pair was replaced by the Megawati Soekarnoputri-Hamzah Haz pair (MPR RI Special Session, July 23, 2001). Sixth, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Jusuf Kalla were elected as President and Vice President for the 2004-2009 period, with President SBY re-elected for a second term in the 2009 election with Boediono as Vice President. Seventh, Joko Widodo and Muhammad Jusuf Kalla were appointed as President and Vice President for the 2014-2019 period, with Jokowi re-elected as President with K.H. Ma'ruf Amin as Vice President for the 2019-2024 period (Pepinsky, 2025).

From the electoral history above, Indonesia has never had a president for life. The first amendment to the 1945 Constitution states that the President and Vice President hold office for five years and can be re-elected for only one additional term.

### **Inclusiveness of Electoral Processes**

The third element of democratic elections is inclusiveness, meaning general elections are conducted openly. In the context of Indonesian elections, this element is found in Law No. 7 of 2017, Chapter 2, Article 2, Paragraph 1, stating that elections are conducted using the principles of direct, general, free, secret, honest, and fair. This is reinforced by Article 3, which states that in organizing elections, election organizers must implement elections based on the principles referred to in Article 2, and the organization must meet the principles of independence, honesty, fairness, legal certainty, order, openness, proportionality, professionalism, accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency.

Furthermore, the Association for Elections and Democracy (Perludem) successfully organized a discussion session themed "Open Elections and Quality of Participatory Democracy" held at the Westin Chosun Hotel, Seoul, Korea (November 6). This discussion was one of the sessions under the theme "Promoting Participatory Democracy," one of the themes promoted by the Open Government Partnership (OGP) Asia Pacific Regional Meeting on its second day. In this discussion, Titi Anggraini, Executive Director of Perludem, shared stories about the Election API (Application Programming Interface) initiative, a platform providing election data in open data format.

When first launched in 2014 at a Hackathon event in Bandung Digital Valley, Election API had stimulated participation from approximately 150 developers gathered in 50 teams and produced over 40 applications in that single day. These applications helped present Indonesian election information (consisting of over three hundred candidates competing for 20,538 seats in 3,087 electoral districts) in simpler and more interactive formats, making it easier for voters. These digital initiatives would be impossible without government involvement, especially election organizers. The Election API initiative emerged after the General Election Commission (KPU) innovated to open various election stage data.

Strong commitment from the government in realizing open elections, a strong regulatory foundation, and active civil society participation in collaboration have proven that the resulting initiatives can stimulate active public participation not only limited to observing election results but also involved in every stage of elections and even after elections. Indonesia's good initiatives received attention from the global community (Perludem, 2020).

### **Definitiveness and Voter Preferences**

The fourth element of democratic elections is definitiveness, meaning citizens have the right to determine who will be Indonesia's next leader. This can be examined through voter preferences in Indonesia. Poltracking Indonesia released national survey results dated May 16-22, 2022, with 1,220 respondents about voter preferences in Indonesia, including: reasons the public chooses presidential and vice-presidential candidates are because of the presidential/vice-presidential figure personally (51.4%), followed by party figure/party leadership figure (14.7%), and because of the nominating political party (8.3%).

The majority of the public are rational voters (30.7%), followed by sociological voters (25.2%) and psychological voters (20.7%). Caring and attentive to the people (16.8%) is the leadership characteristic importantly possessed by presidential and vice-presidential candidates, followed by honest, trustworthy, and corruption-free (16.0%) and experienced (12.7%). Regional head (23.3%) is the most chosen experiential background by the public, followed by minister (9.0%) and politician/member of parliament (8.6%). The most preferred combination of experiential backgrounds for presidential and vice-presidential candidate pairs is regional head-entrepreneur (11.3%), followed by regional head-regional head (10.3%), and regional head-minister (10.2%). The potential public who will definitely vote in the 2024 simultaneous elections is 62.7%, while 18.4% are not yet certain to vote, and 2.8% will not vote (Poltracking Indonesia, 2022).

This indicates that Indonesian society can assess which Indonesian officials are suitable to lead Indonesia next, not only through candidate popularity but also through preferences held by Indonesian society in general.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study reveals several important findings regarding democratic governance in Indonesia's electoral system. First, candidate intensity in Indonesia does not have a major impact on voter preferences, resulting in low Indonesian public participation in democratic governance based on Bawaslu's report on the 2019 Election Campaign. Second, Indonesia has never had a president for life, as the first amendment to the 1945 Constitution states that the President and Vice President hold office for five years and can be re-elected for only one additional term.

Third, Law No. 7 of 2017, Chapter 2, Article 2, Paragraph 1, and reinforced by Article 3, demonstrate that the principles applied in Indonesian elections contain inclusiveness values. Fourth, based on a survey by Poltracking Indonesia in 2022, Indonesian society can assess which Indonesian officials are suitable to lead Indonesia next, not only through candidate popularity but also through preferences held by Indonesian society in general.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed for election organizers. First, research results from both universities and NGOs should be used as evaluation instruments in election organization. Second, political education should be conducted broadly to society so they can better know who will lead their country next. Third, continuous upgrading of the electoral system based on the principles of direct, general, free, secret, honest, and fair should be maintained. These improvements are essential for strengthening democratic governance and enhancing the quality of electoral democracy in Indonesia.

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