



## **The Dynamics of Participatory Democracy in Indonesia: Between Ideality and Socio-Political Reality**

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### **Abstract**

Participatory democracy is one of the democratic models that emphasizes the active involvement of citizens in the public decision-making process. This concept was born as a criticism of procedural democracy which tends to be elitist and only emphasizes the formal aspects of elections. In Indonesia, the practice of participatory democracy began to develop in line with the 1998 political reform that opened up space for freedom of opinion and expanded public access to control the running of government. However, the ideal of participatory democracy is not always in line with the socio-political reality on the ground. Structural barriers, such as rigid bureaucracy, a culture of patronage politics, dominance of political elites, and limited public political literacy, often reduce the effectiveness of participation. This article aims to analyze the dynamics between the ideals of participatory democracy and the reality of its practice in Indonesia. The research method uses a qualitative approach by studying the literature, analyzing documents, previous research results, and regulations related to political participation. The results of the study show that despite significant progress in public engagement, participatory democratic practices are still characterized by unequal access, transactional practices, and weak institutionalization of participation spaces. The discussion emphasized the importance of strengthening civil society capacity, sustainable political education, and policies that support substantive participation. This article concludes that participatory democracy in Indonesia is at the intersection of normative expectations and complex practical realities, thus requiring adaptive strategies that integrate democratic ideals with local socio-political conditions.

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## Introduction

Participatory democracy has become an important concept in contemporary social science studies, in response to criticism of democracy that is only procedural or formal, often emphasizing elections as the main indicator of political legitimacy (Fossati, 2020). In Indonesia, since the post-New Order reform era (1998), there has been hope that participatory democracy will expand the space for people to participate in public decision-making, government oversight, and community-based development planning (Kadir et al., 2021; Berenschot, 2018). However, this idealism is not always in harmony with the reality on the ground, due to a number of structural barriers, political and institutional culture, and the weak capacity of society.

Several studies show that village autonomy, through regulations such as Village Law No. 6/2014, provides opportunities for local democracy and public participation at the village scale, for example through village deliberations and Musrenbang. However, there is evidence that community participation in these forums is often symbolic, does not always influence substantive decisions, or is influenced by the dominance of village elites and local groups who have greater access to resources (Kadir et al., 2021; Hakim et al., 2025). In a study in villages in West Java, for example, it was found that despite deliberative procedures and procedural rules in place, citizens' involvement in development planning practices is still limited to those with adequate social capital and access to information.

In addition to the local aspect, the pattern of patronage democracy is one of the main challenges in participatory democracy in Indonesia. A study by Ward Berenschot and colleagues shows how patronage politics involves the exchange of material or resources for political support, political brokerage activities, and the dominance of informal networks in electoral fights. Many regions show that interpersonal relationships, network loyalty, and gift-giving (clientelism) still greatly influence how citizens vote and how candidates win (Berenschot, 2018).

The quality of participatory democracy is also influenced by people's political literacy, their ability to understand the rights and mechanisms of public involvement, and the ability of government institutions to organize an inclusive and transparent participation space. In this context, research shows that in some villages, participation mechanisms such as village Musrenbang and public consultation processes are often not followed up with concrete follow-up, so that participation becomes a formal ritual without any real policy impact (Kadir et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the phenomenon of digital democracy and participation through new media has emerged as both an opportunity and a challenge. The use of social media, video streaming, online platforms, and digital forums allows for wider public participation, especially among young people. However, factors such as internet access gaps, disinformation, low media literacy, and regulations that are not ready are real obstacles (Wahyuningroem, 2024; Wahidin et al., 2025).

In international research on participatory democracy and deliberative democracy, aspects of legitimacy, equity of resource distribution, and ideological representation are also important points. For example, the study of Fossati (2020) analyzes ideological representation in clientelist democracy, specifically how political ideology tends to be blunt when patronage politics dominates voter choice, and how this impacts the quality of democracy.

In addition, political party institutions also play a key role in participatory democracy. Parties that are organizationally strong and have good institutional capacity tend to encourage more transparent and accountable political practices. On the contrary, the weakness of political parties often exacerbates dependence on political patronage and brokerage (Kristiyanto, 2023; Berenschot, 2018).

Research on the effectiveness of regulation at both the national and local levels shows that while formal regulations (such as village laws, decentralized policies, or public regulations) have provided a legal framework for participatory democracy, their implementation is still often hampered by bureaucracy, corruption, limited local resources, and the interests of political elites. Regulation alone is not enough without local politicians with integrity and civil society who are able to supervise (Blunt, 2015).

In the context of community welfare, a more deliberative and procedural democracy that is more deliberative and procedural, is positively correlated with improved welfare, such as access to health, employment, and social protection. However, these relationships are not always linear when it comes to infrastructure and environmental development, where local conflicts of interest and administrative barriers are inhibiting factors.

Another problem that emerges is the dynamics of identity politics, especially in areas that have ethnic or religious diversity. These identities are often mobilized in politics, and are sometimes used as tools of elites to strengthen their political support bases, which can ultimately reduce spaces for inclusive public dialogue and deliberation (Fossati & Coma, 2020).

Along with that, there are concerns that democracy in Indonesia shows some symptoms of "backsliding" of the quality of democracy. Reports by democracy rating agencies and academic studies show that election integrity, the independence of supervisory institutions (e.g., the KPK), transparency in the management of public funds, and the practice of money politics are increasingly in the spotlight because of the potential to undermine public trust and the legitimacy of the implementation of democracy (Winters, 2016).

From all these reviews, it can be seen that the dynamics of participatory democracy in Indonesia are at the intersection of normative ideals, namely that citizens have the right and ability to participate actively, public policies based on people's aspirations, and responsive government and empirical reality, where practice is often clashed by non-ideal socio-political, cultural, and institutional conditions.

This research invites us to critically explore how the ideals of participatory democracy are structured in theory and regulation in Indonesia, as well as how the reality of practice is at various village, regional, and national levels. Focus will be placed on inhibiting and supporting factors, such as political culture, civil society capacity, the role of political elites and brokers, formal regulation, as well as the influence of technology and digital participation. Thus, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive overview of the

current state of participatory democracy in Indonesia, and identify strategic steps to strengthen its quality.

## Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method. This method was chosen because it is suitable for analyzing participatory democratic concepts and exploring socio-political dynamics in Indonesia through the interpretation of relevant literature sources.

Research data was obtained from various sources, including: (1) national and international scientific journals that discuss issues of democracy, public participation, and Indonesian politics; (2) political theory books that outline the concept of participatory democracy; (3) reports on research institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on monitoring democracy in Indonesia; and (4) official government documents such as laws, regulations, and policies related to public participation.

Data analysis is carried out using a content analysis approach. The analysis process begins by identifying the main themes related to the ideals of participatory democracy, then comparing them with real practices that occur in the Indonesian political context. The data is also categorized into structural, cultural, and institutional aspects to see the factors that affect the effectiveness of community participation.

The validity of the data is maintained by triangulating sources, which is comparing findings from academic literature with reports from civil society organizations and official government policies. In this way, a more comprehensive picture of the condition of participatory democracy in Indonesia is obtained.

## Results and Discussions

The results of the study show that the dynamics of participatory democracy in Indonesia are still in an ambivalent position. On the one hand, there have been significant regulatory and institutional progress since the reform era, but on the other hand, there are still structural, cultural, and political obstacles that make the practice of public participation not yet fully substantive. Literature analysis shows that the reality of public participation in Indonesia is still dominated by elite interests, patronage practices, and limited civil society capacity. Conceptually, participatory democracy emphasizes that political legitimacy does not only come from elections, but also from the active involvement of citizens in the formulation of public policies, supervision of the running of government, and control over the use of state resources. This ideality is reflected in a number of regulations in Indonesia, for example the Village Law No. 6 of 2014 which opens up space for citizens' deliberation through village deliberation forums, Development Planning Deliberation (Musrenbang) at various levels of government, and public information disclosure policies. The existence of these regulations shows the state's efforts to build a more participatory and accountable political system. Thus, normatively, participatory democracy in Indonesia already has a relatively strong foothold.

However, the reality of implementation does not fully reflect the expected ideals. Participatory forums such as Musrenbang are often only ceremonial, where residents' proposals do not have much influence on the final decision of the local government. The

aspirations of the community are often selected based on the interests of the bureaucracy or certain groups that have closeness to the local authorities. This condition shows that there is a gap between the space for participation that is formally promised and the real results received by the community. In other words, public participation is still more procedural than substantive. Electoral politics in Indonesia is still full of patronage and transactional practices. The provision of money, goods, or services by candidates to voters is still the main strategy in political campaigns, so the relationship between citizens and people's representatives is more transactional than substantive. This has an impact on weakening the capacity of the community to truly influence public policy through participatory mechanisms.

Structural challenges faced in participatory democracy in Indonesia include rigid bureaucracy, corruption, weak law enforcement, and the dominance of political elites. Bureaucracy is often an obstacle to participation due to complicated procedures and a lack of transparency, while corruption undermines public trust in the government. In many regions, public decision-making is still influenced by the interests of a handful of political elites and businessmen, so that the voices of the wider community are less grounded. This condition makes it difficult for participatory democracy to run effectively because the power structure does not provide enough space for citizen involvement. In addition to structural factors, cultural challenges also play an important role. Indonesia's strong patron-client political culture often makes citizens more dependent on certain figures than articulating their aspirations independently. Political patronage makes public participation more personal loyalty than involvement based on common interests. The low political literacy of the community also exacerbates this condition, as many citizens do not understand the available participation mechanisms or do not have the courage to voice their aspirations. As a result, public participation is still uneven and is only dominated by certain groups who have better social capital and knowledge.

In the midst of these challenges, civil society continues to play an important role in strengthening participatory democracy. Non-governmental organizations, local community organizations, academic communities, and the mass media are key actors in encouraging public participation. For example, NGOs at the regional level often become facilitators of the Musrenbang so that the process is more inclusive and transparent. The mass media also functions as a watchdog that oversees government policies and exposes corrupt practices or abuse of authority. Social movements, especially those driven by youth and student groups, also contribute to expanding the space for political participation. However, the capacity of civil society is uneven throughout Indonesia. In urban areas their role is quite significant, but in rural or remote areas the role is still very limited.

The development of digital technology opens up new opportunities for participatory democracy in Indonesia. Social media, digital applications, and online platforms allow the public to participate more widely and quickly in conveying their aspirations and supervising public policies. Many citizens now use online petitions or social media to pressure the government to be more responsive to certain issues. The involvement of the younger generation in the digital space shows great potential to build more dynamic public participation. However, this opportunity also presents new challenges, such as disinformation, hate speech, and political polarization that can undermine the quality of

democracy. Therefore, digital participation needs to be balanced with good media literacy and clear regulations in order to be able to support participatory democracy in a healthy manner.

One of the important aspects of participatory democracy study is its relation to the welfare of the community. Some studies have shown that more substantial community participation can improve the quality of public policies and improve basic services such as education, health, and infrastructure. For example, in areas where Musrenbang really involves residents at large, the results of development are more in line with the needs of the local community. However, these relationships are not always linear. In some areas, despite participation, budget constraints and local conflicts of interest have had minimal impact on welfare. This confirms that public participation will only contribute positively when supported by responsive institutions and adequate resources.

In addition, the study also shows that there is a geographical gap in the implementation of participatory democracy. In urban areas, the space for public participation is relatively more open because of higher access to information and community capacity. On the other hand, in rural or remote areas, community participation is still very limited due to access constraints, lack of literacy, and strong influence of local figures. This gap shows that participatory democracy in Indonesia has not been evenly distributed and still requires a special strategy to strengthen participation in disadvantaged areas.

Another factor that is quite influential is the dynamics of identity politics, where issues of ethnicity, religion, and regionality are often mobilized for political interests. This identity mobilization sometimes reinforces the participation of certain groups, but on the other hand it can reduce the inclusiveness of participatory democracy. In some cases, identity politics actually narrows the space for deliberation because public debate is dominated more by primordial sentiments than rational arguments based on public interest. Therefore, although identity politics can be an entry point for participation, in the long run it risks eroding the quality of participatory democracy.

The results of the study as a whole confirm that the success of participatory democracy is highly dependent on the synergy between the state and society. The government must provide a transparent, inclusive, and responsive mechanism to the aspirations of the community, while citizens need to increase their political capacity in order to participate effectively. Without this synergy, participatory democracy will only be a formality that does not have a significant impact on the quality of public policy and the welfare of the community.

Thus, it can be concluded that participatory democracy in Indonesia faces a paradox between normative ideals and practical reality. Regulations are already quite progressive, but implementation is still weak due to elite dominance, a culture of patronage, low political literacy, and geographical inequality. However, the development of digital technology, the role of civil society, and the encouragement of the younger generation open up new opportunities to strengthen participatory democracy. In the future, a more comprehensive strategy is needed, starting from strengthening political education, empowering civil society in the regions, to reforming political culture so that participatory democracy can truly run in a substantive and inclusive manner in Indonesia.

## Conclusion

Participatory democracy in Indonesia is a phenomenon that has developed after the 1998 reform, marked by increasing space for people to be involved in public decision-making. Ideally, participatory democracy is expected to be able to give birth to a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable government. Supporting regulations, such as the Musrenbang, the Village Law, and public information disclosure, have provided a normative basis for public participation.

However, the reality on the ground shows a fairly significant gap between idealism and practice. Community participation is often only procedural and symbolic, with no real influence on policy. The political culture of patronage, elite domination, and low political literacy of the community are serious obstacles to realizing substantial participatory democracy. In addition, geographical gaps and institutional capacity lead to uneven access to participation throughout Indonesia.

Nevertheless, there are positive developments through the role of civil society, the media, and social movements that continue to encourage the democratic space to be more open. The existence of these non-state actors has the potential to strengthen the check and balance mechanism and ensure that people's aspirations are channeled, although they are still limited to certain contexts.

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