

Procedural Democracy and Substantive Decline: Rethinking Democratic Quality in Post-Reform Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Since Reformasi 1998, Indonesia has implemented key democratic procedures such as elections and institutional reforms. However, these developments have not fully ensured substantive democratic quality.

Aims: This study aims to examine the tension between procedural democracy and substantive decline by rethinking the quality of democracy in post-reform Indonesia.

Methods: This research adopts a qualitative, conceptual approach based on a critical review of recent scholarly literature, policy discussions, and theoretical perspectives on democratic quality. The analysis focuses on identifying patterns and arguments that explain the gap between formal democratic structures and their substantive outcomes.

Result: The study finds that Indonesia's democracy demonstrates procedural stability, yet faces challenges in its substantive dimensions, including accountability, equality, and inclusive participation. The growing influence of political oligarchies and dynastic practices indicates that democratic institutions often function formally without fully delivering their intended democratic values.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that Indonesia's democracy reflects a condition of procedural strength but substantive limitation. Strengthening democratic quality requires greater emphasis on accountability, inclusiveness, and the alignment between institutional practices and democratic principles.

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Introduction

Since Reformasi 1998, Indonesia has experienced a major political shift from an authoritarian system toward a more open and democratic order. This transition brought significant institutional changes, including constitutional amendments and the establishment of competitive elections, which gradually reshaped the country's political landscape (Szente, 2022). Over time, these reforms have positioned Indonesia as one of the most prominent democratic cases in the Global South, often highlighted for its relatively stable electoral processes and institutional continuity (Kenawas, 2023).

The strengthening of democratic procedures has become a key marker of this transformation. Elections are conducted regularly, political parties operate openly, and decentralization has allowed greater regional participation in governance (Kollman & Worthington, 2021; Sampe, 2021). From an institutional perspective, these developments suggest that democratic mechanisms are functioning in line with procedural expectations, reinforcing the perception that democracy in Indonesia has been successfully consolidated (Kristiyanto et al., 2023; Slater, 2023).

However, focusing primarily on procedural indicators may overlook deeper issues within the democratic system. While institutions appear to operate as expected, questions remain about their capacity to deliver accountability, fairness, and meaningful public engagement (Webler & Tuler, 2021). This raises an important concern that procedural compliance alone does not necessarily reflect the actual quality of democracy experienced by citizens (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025).

Recent political developments further complicate this picture. The persistence of elite dominance, the expansion of political dynasties, and the growing influence of oligarchic networks indicate that power remains concentrated within limited circles (Acuna et al., 2025). These patterns suggest that democratic

institutions may function more as formal structures rather than as mechanisms that genuinely represent public interests (Jungherr & Schroeder, 2021).

Taken together, these conditions reveal a tension between the stability of democratic procedures and the weakening of their substantive outcomes. Although Indonesia continues to maintain its democratic framework, its ability to uphold core democratic values appears increasingly constrained. This situation highlights the need to reassess how democratic quality is understood, particularly in contexts where form and substance do not fully align (Vasilaras et al., 2024).

The distinction between procedural and substantive democracy has long been a central discussion in democratic theory. Procedural democracy emphasizes formal mechanisms such as elections, institutional arrangements, and rule-based governance, while substantive democracy focuses on outcomes, including equality, participation, and responsiveness (Chen, 2026). Scholars have argued that the existence of democratic procedures alone is insufficient to ensure that democratic values are fully realized in practice (Hendriks, 2022). More recent discussions on democratic quality have introduced the idea that democracies can function in a hybrid or incomplete manner. In such cases, formal institutions remain intact, but their effectiveness is undermined by issues such as weak accountability, elite capture, and limited inclusiveness (Muallidin, 2025). This perspective shifts the focus from simply assessing whether democracy exists to evaluating how well it performs in delivering its core principles (Gordon et al., 2022). In the Indonesian context, a number of studies have pointed out the persistence of oligarchic influence and transactional political practices. These conditions often limit broader participation and reduce the capacity of institutions to act independently. As a result, democratic processes may continue formally, while their substantive impact on governance and public welfare remains limited (Dorlach, 2021).

Despite the expanding body of research on Indonesian democracy, several important gaps can still be identified. First, many studies tend to emphasize procedural aspects such as elections, decentralization, and institutional reforms without sufficiently examining how these elements relate to substantive democratic outcomes (Faguet & Shami, 2022; Hidayat et al., 2025). This creates a tendency to assess democracy based on its formal structure rather than its actual performance (Boston, 2021). Second, existing research often addresses key issues such as oligarchy, political dynasties, or electoral behavior in a fragmented manner. These studies provide valuable insights, yet they rarely integrate these elements into a comprehensive framework that explains the coexistence of procedural stability and substantive decline (Blanco et al., 2022). As a result, the relationship between democratic form and democratic substance remains underexplored. Third, there is still limited effort to critically rethink democratic quality in light of Indonesia's evolving political dynamics. Much of the literature remains descriptive, focusing on identifying problems rather than developing a conceptual explanation of how and why these conditions persist (Rowan et al., 2021). This indicates a need for a more integrative and critical approach that can connect institutional practices with broader questions of democratic quality.

Considering the coexistence of stable democratic procedures and indications of substantive weakening, it becomes important to revisit how democratic quality is conceptualized in the Indonesian context. A conceptual approach allows for a deeper exploration of how institutional arrangements interact with power relations and political practices (Sager & Gofen, 2022)). This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding why democratic systems may appear stable while simultaneously experiencing internal limitations. By engaging with broader theoretical debates on democratic quality, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced interpretation of Indonesia's democratic condition. Rather than focusing solely on institutional performance, it emphasizes the need to examine how democracy operates in practice and how its outcomes affect society (Felicetti, 2021). In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about the limitations of procedural democracy and the importance of substantive considerations.

This study aims to critically examine the relationship between procedural democracy and substantive decline by rethinking democratic quality in post-reform Indonesia. It seeks to explain how

procedural stability can coexist with substantive limitations and to explore the broader implications of this condition for democratic governance. Ultimately, this study is expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of democracy that goes beyond formal institutional arrangements toward its substantive realization.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative design based on a conceptual and normative approach, which is commonly used to examine theoretical and institutional phenomena without relying on primary field data (Gatti & McAvoy, 2024). Rather than collecting empirical data, the study focuses on critically engaging with existing theoretical perspectives and scholarly discussions related to procedural democracy and substantive democratic decline. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond formal institutional arrangements and focus on how democracy operates in practice. By engaging with key debates in political theory and governance, the study aims to reinterpret democratic quality within the context of post-reform Indonesia. The conceptual orientation of this research provides a framework for understanding how procedural stability may coexist with substantive limitations.

Participant

This study does not involve human participants, as it is designed as a conceptual inquiry. Instead, the unit of analysis consists of a body of academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and theoretical works relevant to democracy and political dynamics in Indonesia. The selected sources primarily cover publications from 2020 to 2026 to ensure that the discussion reflects recent developments and ongoing debates. The selection process is guided by relevance to the research focus, analytical depth, and academic credibility.

Instrument

The main instrument in this study is a structured document analysis framework used to examine and interpret the selected literature, a method widely applied in qualitative research to analyze textual and conceptual data (Gatti & McAvoy, 2024). The framework focuses on several key dimensions, including procedural democracy, substantive democracy, democratic quality, accountability, participation, and the distribution of power. In addition, a conceptual mapping technique is employed to trace recurring patterns and relationships across different sources. This process helps organize diverse theoretical arguments into a coherent analytical structure, enabling a clearer understanding of the research problem.

Data Analysis

The analysis is conducted using qualitative content analysis, which allows for the systematic identification of themes, patterns, and conceptual relationships within textual data (Klarin, 2024). The process unfolds in several interconnected stages. First, relevant information is identified and selected through a data reduction process, focusing on discussions related to procedural and substantive dimensions of democracy. Second, the selected data are organized into thematic categories, such as institutional performance, elite influence, and public participation.

Next, a conceptual mapping process is carried out to identify patterns and relationships among key concepts. Finally, the data are interpreted through a critical lens to explain how procedural stability can exist alongside substantive decline. This interpretative process allows the study to develop a more reflective and analytical understanding of democratic quality in post-reform Indonesia.

The overall analytical process of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

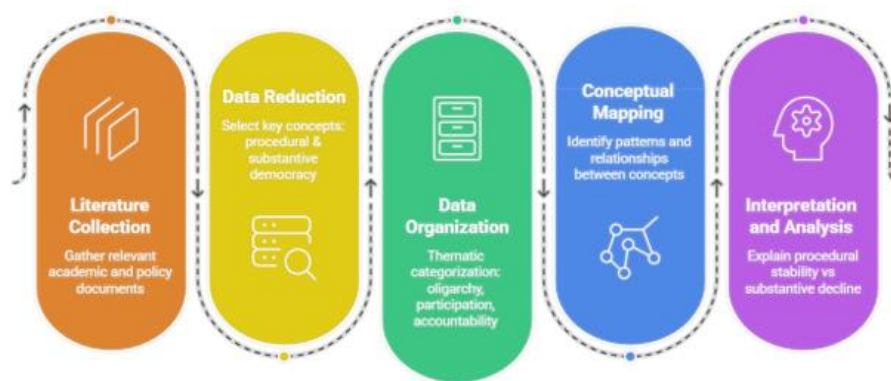


Figure 1. Research Flowchart of Conceptual Analysis

Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis reveals a consistent pattern in which Indonesia’s democratic system demonstrates strong procedural stability while experiencing notable weaknesses in its substantive dimensions. From a procedural perspective, democratic mechanisms such as regular elections, a multiparty system, and institutional continuity remain firmly established. These features indicate that the formal structure of democracy continues to function in accordance with widely accepted democratic standards. However, these procedural achievements are not fully accompanied by improvements in substantive democratic quality. Several studies indicate that, despite the presence of competitive elections, oligarchic influence continues to shape political processes and policy outcomes. This suggests that electoral democracy alone is insufficient to ensure accountability and inclusiveness in governance.

In addition, political participation, while formally maintained, does not always reflect meaningful engagement. Empirical observations show that voter turnout in certain regional elections has declined, such as in the 2024 local election in Cirebon, where participation reached only 59.53%, falling below national expectations. This condition reflects growing political disengagement and declining public trust in democratic institutions. Furthermore, the expansion of political dynasties illustrates that access to power is not equally distributed in practice. Although democratic systems formally guarantee equal political rights, political leadership often remains concentrated within specific familial or elite networks. This reinforces patterns of patronage and limits broader political inclusion. To clarify these findings, the relationship between procedural democracy and substantive democratic decline in post-reform Indonesia is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Synthesis of Procedural Democracy and Substantive Decline in Post-Reform Indonesia (Based on Previous Studies)

Dimension	Procedural Democracy (Evidence from Literature)	Substantive Democracy (Observed Limitation)	Source
Elections	Regular and competitive electoral processes	Influenced by oligarchic interests	CosmoGov Journal (Universitas Padjadjaran)
Political Participation	Formal participation remains relatively high	Declining voter turnout and political apathy (e.g., 59.53% in Cirebon 2024)	EduEksos Journal (IAIN Syekh Nurjati)
Power Distribution	Formally open political system	Dominated by economic and political elites	CosmoGov Journal
Political Access	Equal rights guaranteed by law	Restricted by dynastic and patronage networks	JOG Journal (Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa)

democratic performance. While democratic institutions continue to function effectively at a formal level, their capacity to ensure accountability, equality, and meaningful participation remains constrained.

Overall, these findings reveal a fundamental paradox in Indonesia's post-reform democracy. The system appears consolidated in procedural terms but remains limited in its substantive realization. This condition underscores the importance of rethinking democratic quality, not only as a matter of institutional design but also as a reflection of how democratic practices operate in reality.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a noticeable imbalance between procedural and substantive dimensions of democracy in post-reform Indonesia. On the one hand, democratic procedures such as regular elections and an open political system continue to function relatively well. On the other hand, these procedural achievements are not always followed by improvements in substantive aspects such as accountability and meaningful participation (Becchetti et al., 2022). This suggests that the success of democracy cannot be assessed solely based on formal procedures, but must also consider how those procedures operate in practice (Ayres, 2022).

Furthermore, the results indicate that elite influence remains a significant factor in shaping Indonesia's democratic landscape. Political power tends to be concentrated among certain groups that possess strong economic resources and political networks (Taylor & Bhasme, 2021). As a result, democratic processes may not fully reflect broader public interests, limiting the role of democracy as an inclusive system of representation (Rey, 2023).

In addition, the expansion of political dynasties highlights another challenge to substantive democracy. Although equal political rights are formally guaranteed, access to power in practice is often more accessible to individuals or groups with existing political connections. This condition reduces political competitiveness and reinforces inequality within the democratic system (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2023).

From the perspective of participation, the findings suggest that public involvement remains largely procedural. Citizens actively participate in elections, yet their engagement does not always translate into real influence over policy-making processes (Simonofski et al., 2021). This indicates that political participation is still limited to formal activities and has not fully developed into a more substantive and impactful form of engagement.

Overall, this study shows that Indonesia's democracy can be considered procedurally strong but substantively limited. Strengthening democratic quality therefore requires not only maintaining institutional stability but also improving the way democratic practices function in reality, particularly in terms of inclusiveness and accountability (de Sousa et al., 2023). In this way, democracy can move beyond formal procedures and provide more meaningful outcomes for society as a whole (Singer-Brodowski, 2025).

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that evaluating democracy in post-reform Indonesia requires a broader perspective that goes beyond formal procedures. While elections and institutional stability remain important, they do not fully capture how democracy is experienced in practice. This implies that democratic quality should also be understood in terms of how far citizens are able to participate meaningfully and how responsive institutions are to public needs. In a more practical sense, strengthening democracy is not simply about preserving existing structures, but about improving how those structures function. Efforts to reduce the concentration of power, enhance transparency, and encourage more inclusive participation are essential. Without such improvements, democratic institutions may continue to operate formally while falling short in delivering substantive outcomes.

Limitations

This study is based on a conceptual and literature-driven approach, which means that it does not directly capture empirical variations across different regions or communities. As a result, the findings

should be understood as a general interpretation of democratic patterns rather than a detailed account of specific cases. Another limitation lies in the scope of analysis, which focuses on broad democratic dynamics without examining particular policy sectors or localized political practices. These aspects may offer additional insights that are beyond the reach of the current study.

Suggestions

Future research could build on this study by incorporating empirical methods, such as case studies or mixed approaches, to explore how procedural and substantive democracy interact in specific contexts. Such approaches would help provide a more grounded understanding of democratic quality across different regions in Indonesia. Further studies may also consider examining emerging factors, including digital political engagement, the role of younger generations, and the influence of policy-making processes on public trust. Exploring these areas would contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of democracy in post-reform Indonesia.

Conclusion

This study shows that democracy in post-reform Indonesia cannot be fully understood by looking at its procedural achievements alone. While elections continue to take place regularly and political institutions remain formally stable, these conditions do not automatically lead to stronger accountability, broader inclusion, or meaningful public participation. In many cases, democratic practices still operate within constraints shaped by elite influence and limited citizen impact on decision-making processes. This creates a situation where democracy appears well-established in form, yet remains uneven in its substance. Reflecting on this condition, the study emphasizes the need to reconsider how democratic quality is understood, not only in terms of institutional performance but also in how democratic values are experienced in everyday governance. Strengthening democracy, therefore, requires attention not only to maintaining procedural stability but also to improving the depth of participation, fairness, and responsiveness within the system.

Author Contributions Statement

Dwi Aulia Hafifah contributed to the conceptualization of the study, development of the research framework, and drafting of the manuscript. Genta Rahbani was responsible for the literature review, data organization, and initial analysis. Hafiz Wahyu Gusman contributed to the interpretation of findings, refinement of the discussion, and overall manuscript revision. Rudi Santoso supervised the research process, provided critical feedback, and guided the development of the manuscript to ensure its academic quality.

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