

Crisis of Public Trust in Government and the Challenges of Political Ethics in Contemporary Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Background: In recent years, public confidence in the Indonesian government has shown a noticeable decline. Issues such as corruption, inconsistent law enforcement, and political polarization have contributed to growing public skepticism toward state institutions and political actors. This situation reflects the increasing importance of political ethics in maintaining democratic stability and public legitimacy.

Aims: This article seeks to identify the main factors behind the decline of public trust in government and to explore the ethical challenges emerging within Indonesia's contemporary political environment.

Methods: The study applies a qualitative descriptive approach based on literature review. Information and data were gathered from academic publications, policy discussions, books, and credible media sources related to governance, public trust, and political ethics in Indonesia.

Result: The analysis indicates that public distrust is strongly influenced by unethical political behavior, limited governmental transparency, and the perception that political interests are often prioritized over public welfare. Moreover, the spread of misinformation and the rise of pragmatic political practices further weaken democratic values and ethical standards in politics.

Conclusion: The decline of public trust cannot be separated from the weakening of ethical principles in political practice. Strengthening accountability, integrity, and ethical awareness among political actors is necessary to rebuild public confidence and support healthier democratic governance in Indonesia.

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Introduction

Public trust is widely recognized as one of the essential foundations of democratic governance because it influences political legitimacy, social stability, and citizens' participation in public affairs. In democratic countries, trust toward governmental institutions is closely related to perceptions of transparency, accountability, and ethical leadership. In the Indonesian context, however, public confidence in political institutions has experienced significant fluctuations in recent years due to repeated corruption scandals, political polarization, and controversies surrounding public policy decisions. Several studies argue that declining trust in government often emerges when citizens perceive a gap between political promises and actual governmental performance (Carstens, 2023; McKay et al., 2021). The issue has become increasingly relevant in contemporary Indonesia, where political communication is strongly shaped by digital media and rapid information exchange. As a result, political ethics is no longer viewed merely as a moral concept, but also as a crucial element in maintaining democratic legitimacy and institutional credibility. Therefore, understanding the relationship between public trust and political ethics has become an important academic and practical concern.

The decline of public trust in Indonesia can be observed through various empirical phenomena that have attracted widespread public attention. Cases involving corruption among public officials, inconsistent legal enforcement, and controversial political decisions have contributed to skepticism toward state institutions. Reports from organizations such as Transparency International continue to show that corruption remains a major challenge for governance quality in Indonesia. At the same time,

the rise of misinformation and political propaganda through digital platforms has intensified social polarization and weakened public confidence in political actors (Au et al., 2022). Political debates in Indonesia are increasingly dominated by pragmatic interests rather than substantive public discourse, creating a perception that democratic processes mainly benefit elite groups. This condition has generated frustration among citizens, especially younger generations who actively engage in digital political discussions. Consequently, the crisis of trust has evolved into a broader issue concerning democratic ethics and political responsibility.

The urgency of this topic becomes more apparent when considering the broader consequences of declining public trust for democratic governance. Trust plays an important role in strengthening public compliance with state policies, encouraging civic participation, and maintaining social cohesion during periods of political uncertainty. When trust deteriorates, citizens tend to become apathetic toward political processes and less willing to participate constructively in democratic activities (Nelson & Shelton, 2021; Ouattara & Meer, 2023). In Indonesia, this phenomenon may weaken the effectiveness of public institutions and increase political cynicism within society. Furthermore, unethical political behavior often creates long-term damage to democratic culture because it normalizes opportunistic practices among political elites. Several scholars have emphasized that democratic consolidation cannot be achieved solely through institutional reforms without strengthening ethical values in political practice (Jatau & Maza, 2023). Hence, the issue of political ethics deserves serious academic attention because it directly affects democratic sustainability in Indonesia.

Another reason this topic is important lies in the changing nature of political interaction in the digital era. The rapid development of social media has transformed the relationship between governments, political elites, and citizens by creating faster channels for political communication and public criticism. While digital platforms may encourage democratic participation, they also facilitate the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and manipulative political narratives (Jatau & Maza, 2023). In Indonesia, online political discourse frequently reflects emotional polarization rather than rational democratic deliberation. This situation complicates efforts to build ethical political communication and transparent governance. Moreover, political actors often prioritize short-term popularity and electoral interests instead of long-term public welfare. Such practices gradually reduce public confidence in democratic institutions and weaken the moral standards expected from political leaders. Therefore, examining political ethics within the context of digital democracy is increasingly relevant for understanding Indonesia's contemporary political challenges.

Previous studies have discussed public trust and political ethics from various perspectives. Research conducted by Tambunan (2023); Tomsa & Bax (2023) emphasized the relationship between democratic regression and declining institutional legitimacy in Indonesia. Similarly, Aspinall and Apriliyanti (2023) highlighted the persistence of clientelism and oligarchic networks in shaping Indonesian politics. Other scholars have examined the impact of corruption on public confidence in government institutions. Ali & Eriyanto (2021) also explored how digital media contributes to polarization and misinformation in Indonesian politics. Meanwhile, Kaasa & Andriani (2022) argued that public trust is strongly influenced by perceptions of institutional effectiveness and accountability. Additional research has focused on ethical leadership, political communication, and democratic participation in Southeast Asian countries Amrullah (2024). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that trust and ethics are interconnected dimensions within democratic governance.

Despite the growing number of studies on Indonesian democracy, several limitations remain evident in the existing literature. Many previous studies primarily focus on institutional performance, corruption, or electoral competition without comprehensively examining political ethics as a central analytical framework. Some researchers also tend to analyze public trust only from the perspective of governance effectiveness while overlooking the moral dimension of political behavior. Furthermore, discussions regarding digital political communication often emphasize technological aspects rather than ethical implications for democratic culture. Existing studies frequently examine these issues separately,

causing limited integration between discussions of trust, ethics, and digital political dynamics. In addition, empirical discussions on contemporary Indonesia still lack critical exploration of how unethical political practices shape long-term democratic legitimacy. As a result, there remains a significant gap in understanding the interconnected relationship between declining public trust and ethical challenges in Indonesia's evolving political environment.

This study attempts to address those limitations by providing a more integrated analysis of public trust and political ethics in contemporary Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that mainly focus on institutional performance or electoral politics, this research places ethical considerations at the center of democratic governance analysis. It also examines how corruption, political pragmatism, misinformation, and elite-centered policymaking collectively influence citizens' perceptions of government legitimacy. By combining discussions of governance ethics and democratic trust, this study offers a broader understanding of Indonesia's political challenges in the digital era. The analysis is expected to contribute theoretically to discussions on democratic legitimacy and political ethics in developing democracies. Practically, the findings may provide insights for policymakers, academics, and civil society actors regarding the importance of ethical governance in rebuilding public confidence. Ultimately, this study seeks to encourage more accountable and ethically grounded political practices within Indonesia's democratic system.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the crisis of public trust in government and the challenges of political ethics in contemporary Indonesia. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aimed to explore political and social phenomena through interpretative analysis rather than numerical measurement. The descriptive-analytical design enabled the researcher to critically examine political realities, governance practices, and ethical issues emerging in Indonesian democracy. In addition, this approach facilitated a deeper understanding of how corruption, political communication, misinformation, and elite behavior influence public trust toward governmental institutions. The study primarily relied on literature-based inquiry and document analysis to generate comprehensive interpretations of the research problem.

Participant

The participants in this study were not individual respondents but consisted of academic and institutional sources relevant to the research topic. The data population included scholarly journal articles, government publications, policy reports, books, and credible media sources discussing political ethics, democratic governance, corruption, and public trust in Indonesia. Purposive sampling was applied to select sources that met specific inclusion criteria, including publication relevance, academic credibility, and publication period between 2021 and 2026. Sources lacking methodological clarity, academic reliability, or direct relevance to the research focus were excluded from the analysis. The selection of these materials was intended to ensure that the collected data accurately reflected contemporary political dynamics and ethical challenges in Indonesia.

Instrument

The primary research instrument was a document analysis framework designed to identify major themes related to public trust and political ethics. The framework included several analytical indicators, such as transparency, accountability, corruption, political communication, democratic participation, and ethical governance. In addition, a structured note-taking matrix was used to organize and classify information gathered from multiple sources. The instrument was developed based on established theories of democratic legitimacy and political ethics from previous scholarly studies. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, coding guidelines were also applied to categorize recurring themes systematically and consistently throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques commonly employed in qualitative research. The analysis began with data reduction by selecting information relevant to the objectives of the study. Subsequently, the researcher conducted open coding to identify recurring concepts associated with governance ethics and public trust. Similar codes were then grouped into broader thematic categories, including corruption, political pragmatism, transparency, misinformation, and democratic legitimacy. The categorized themes were interpreted descriptively to explain the relationship between unethical political practices and declining public trust in Indonesia. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing information from different academic and institutional sources. Furthermore, the study adhered to academic ethical principles by maintaining citation accuracy, research transparency, and objective interpretation throughout the analytical process.



Figure 1. Research Procedure Flowchart of the Study on Public Trust Crisis and Political Ethics in Contemporary Indonesia

Results and Discussion

Results

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach using thematic analysis to examine the crisis of public trust in government and the challenges of political ethics in contemporary Indonesia. The findings were derived from the analysis of academic literature, policy reports, institutional publications, and credible media sources published between 2021 and 2026. Through coding, categorization, and interpretative analysis, several dominant themes were identified regarding the factors contributing to declining public trust and the weakening of political ethics in Indonesia.

Table 1. Main Findings of the Study

No.	Main Theme	Key Findings	Interpretation
1	Corruption and Abuse of Power	Repeated corruption cases involving political elites and public officials reduce institutional credibility.	Public trust declines when governmental institutions are perceived as prioritizing elite interests over public welfare.
2	Weak Transparency	Limited openness in policymaking processes creates skepticism toward government decisions.	Lack of transparency weakens democratic legitimacy and public accountability.
3	Political Pragmatism	Political actors tend to prioritize strategic and electoral interests over ethical principles.	Pragmatic political behavior normalizes unethical practices within governance.
4	Digital Misinformation	Social media facilitates the spread of misinformation and political propaganda.	Digital polarization intensifies distrust and weakens social cohesion.
5	Declining Civic Engagement	Public disappointment toward political institutions encourages apathy and reduced participation.	Distrust negatively affects democratic participation and civic responsibility.
6	Ethical Governance as a Solution	Transparency, accountability, and ethical leadership are considered essential for restoring trust.	Strengthening political ethics is necessary to rebuild democratic legitimacy.

The first major finding indicates that corruption remains one of the primary factors contributing to the decline of public trust in governmental institutions. The analyzed sources consistently demonstrate that repeated corruption cases involving public officials, regional leaders, and political elites have negatively affected citizens' perceptions of governmental integrity. In qualitative terms, the literature reflects a strong public perception that political power is frequently used to serve elite interests rather than public welfare. This condition weakens institutional legitimacy and creates skepticism toward democratic governance. Several studies also suggest that inconsistent law enforcement further intensifies public dissatisfaction because citizens perceive unequal treatment before the law.

The second finding reveals that weak transparency and ineffective political communication significantly influence public distrust. The study found that unclear policy communication and limited public involvement in decision-making processes often generate uncertainty and criticism within society. In the context of digital democracy, government communication is increasingly scrutinized through social media platforms, where political narratives spread rapidly. However, the circulation of misinformation and emotionally driven political content has complicated efforts to maintain constructive democratic dialogue. The findings suggest that citizens tend to lose confidence in political institutions when information transparency is perceived as insufficient or politically manipulative.

Another important finding concerns the growing dominance of political pragmatism in contemporary Indonesian politics. The thematic analysis demonstrates that political actors frequently prioritize electoral interests and strategic alliances over ethical principles and ideological consistency. This pragmatic orientation creates a public perception that political decisions are often motivated by

power consolidation rather than public interest. As a result, democratic processes are increasingly viewed as transactional and elitist. The literature further indicates that political pragmatism weakens ethical standards within governance because opportunistic behavior becomes normalized among political elites.

The study also found that declining public trust has broader implications for democratic participation and civic engagement. Citizens who perceive governmental institutions as unethical are more likely to develop political apathy and skepticism toward democratic processes. Several reviewed studies indicate that prolonged distrust may reduce public willingness to participate in elections, political discussions, and civic activities. In addition, social polarization intensified by digital political discourse contributes to fragmentation within society. This finding suggests that the crisis of trust is not only a governance issue but also a challenge to democratic stability and social cohesion in Indonesia.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the crisis of public trust in Indonesia is closely linked to ethical challenges in political practice, including corruption, weak accountability, political pragmatism, and misinformation. The qualitative findings highlight that restoring public confidence requires stronger ethical governance, transparent policymaking, and consistent law enforcement. Furthermore, improving political education and digital literacy is considered essential for strengthening democratic resilience and encouraging healthier relationships between government institutions and society.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the crisis of public trust in contemporary Indonesia cannot be separated from the persistence of corruption and unethical political behavior within governmental institutions. The analysis suggests that corruption functions not only as a legal or administrative problem but also as a symbolic indicator of institutional moral failure. From the perspective of democratic legitimacy theory, public trust tends to decline when citizens perceive that political institutions fail to uphold fairness, accountability, and public responsibility. This finding supports previous studies conducted by Campbell & Danar (2025), which emphasized that corruption weakens institutional credibility and democratic consolidation in Indonesia. However, this study further extends earlier arguments by demonstrating that corruption also produces long-term ethical consequences, including public cynicism toward democratic governance itself. In this context, public distrust emerges not merely because corruption exists, but because citizens increasingly perceive unethical behavior as structurally embedded within political institutions. Therefore, the crisis of trust should be interpreted as both an institutional and ethical problem simultaneously.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between transparency and political communication in shaping democratic legitimacy. The results indicate that limited openness in policymaking processes contributes significantly to public skepticism toward government institutions. This finding aligns with Habermas' theory of communicative action, which argues that democratic legitimacy depends heavily on transparent and rational communication between the state and citizens. In practice, however, political communication in Indonesia is often characterized by inconsistent narratives and defensive governmental responses, particularly during controversial political decisions. Similar conclusions were identified in studies by Schäfer (2023), which found that ineffective communication strategies increase public uncertainty and political polarization in digital societies. Nevertheless, this study argues that the issue extends beyond communication failure alone because transparency is closely related to ethical accountability in governance. In other words, communication becomes ineffective when citizens perceive that information is intentionally manipulated to protect political interests rather than promote public understanding. Consequently, transparency should be viewed not only as a technical governance principle but also as an ethical obligation within democratic systems.

The findings also reveal that political pragmatism has become increasingly dominant in Indonesia's contemporary political landscape. Political actors frequently prioritize electoral calculations and strategic alliances over ideological consistency and ethical commitments. This condition supports the

arguments of Vikalista et al. (2026), who described Indonesian democracy as strongly influenced by transactional politics and elite-centered networks. However, this study provides a more critical interpretation by emphasizing that political pragmatism contributes directly to the erosion of ethical political culture. When opportunistic behavior becomes normalized, democratic institutions gradually lose their normative foundations because politics is perceived primarily as an instrument of power maintenance. This phenomenon partially contradicts liberal democratic assumptions suggesting that competitive electoral systems automatically strengthen accountability and representation. Instead, the findings indicate that electoral competition may also encourage short-term political behavior when ethical standards remain weak. Therefore, democratic procedures alone are insufficient to maintain public trust without corresponding ethical commitments from political actors.

The influence of digital media on political trust represents another critical dimension identified in this study. The findings demonstrate that social media platforms simultaneously facilitate democratic participation and intensify political polarization through misinformation and emotionally driven discourse. This result is consistent with previous research highlighting the dual role of digital media in contemporary democracies Berg & Hofmann (2021). However, this study expands existing discussions by emphasizing that digital polarization in Indonesia is not solely technological in nature but also reflects broader weaknesses in political ethics and democratic literacy. Political actors frequently exploit digital platforms to mobilize support through emotional narratives rather than substantive policy discussions. As a result, democratic deliberation becomes increasingly fragmented and less oriented toward rational public debate. This finding challenges optimistic perspectives that portray digital media as inherently democratizing. Instead, the study suggests that technological development may weaken democratic trust when ethical communication standards are not adequately maintained within political discourse.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that declining public trust has broader implications for civic engagement and democratic participation. Citizens who perceive governmental institutions as unethical tend to develop political apathy and skepticism toward democratic processes. This finding supports Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) argument that institutional trust significantly influences political participation and democratic resilience. Several previous studies similarly found that prolonged distrust reduces public willingness to engage in elections and civic activities Koivula et al. (2021). Nevertheless, the present study suggests that political disengagement in Indonesia is not necessarily a sign of democratic indifference but may instead represent a form of disappointment toward the perceived moral failure of political institutions. This interpretation provides a more nuanced understanding of political apathy by linking it to ethical disillusionment rather than mere civic passivity. Consequently, rebuilding democratic participation requires not only institutional reforms but also efforts to restore ethical credibility within governance practices.

Another significant aspect emerging from the findings concerns the contextual nature of Indonesia's democratic challenges. Unlike established democracies where institutional trust is relatively stable, Indonesia continues to experience tensions between democratic ideals and oligarchic political structures. This condition helps explain why public distrust persists despite procedural democratic improvements such as regular elections and expanded political participation. Studies by Tambunan (2023) argued that oligarchic networks continue to shape political decision-making in Indonesia, limiting substantive democratic transformation. The present study reinforces this perspective but also demonstrates that the persistence of oligarchic influence contributes to ethical normalization of elite-centered governance. In this context, democratic institutions may formally function while simultaneously losing moral legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. Therefore, the Indonesian case illustrates that democratic consolidation should not be evaluated solely through procedural indicators but also through ethical and societal dimensions of governance Hadiwasito (2024).

The discussion further indicates that this study contributes theoretically by integrating political ethics into analyses of democratic legitimacy and public trust Holdo (2022). Previous studies often examined corruption, political communication, or democratic participation separately, whereas this

research demonstrates the interconnected relationship among these dimensions. By positioning ethics as a central analytical framework, the study expands conventional discussions of public trust beyond institutional performance alone. This contribution is important because it highlights that democratic crises are frequently rooted in normative and moral issues rather than exclusively administrative failures Koliba (2025). From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening transparency, accountability, and ethical political leadership is essential for rebuilding democratic legitimacy in Indonesia. In addition, improving political education and digital literacy may help reduce the influence of misinformation and encourage more constructive democratic engagement Diepeveen & Pinet (2022). These implications demonstrate that restoring public trust requires comprehensive reforms involving both institutional governance and political culture.

Overall, the findings position this study within broader global discussions concerning democratic decline, political polarization, and institutional legitimacy in contemporary democracies Bernaerts et al. (2023). Similar patterns of distrust have been identified in various democratic countries; however, the Indonesian context reveals distinctive interactions between digital politics, oligarchic structures, and ethical governance challenges. This study therefore contributes a contextual perspective from Southeast Asia to global debates on democratic resilience and political ethics Amrullah (2024). More importantly, the research argues that public trust cannot be restored solely through procedural democratic reforms without addressing the ethical foundations of political practice Mozumder (2022). The crisis of trust ultimately reflects a deeper struggle over democratic values, institutional morality, and public accountability in modern governance systems. Accordingly, future democratic development in Indonesia depends not only on strengthening political institutions but also on reinforcing ethical commitments within political culture and leadership practices.

Implications

The results of this study indicate that efforts to restore public trust in Indonesia cannot rely solely on administrative reforms or institutional restructuring. The crisis of trust appears to be strongly connected to ethical concerns surrounding political behavior, accountability, and the credibility of public institutions. In this context, strengthening democratic governance requires greater commitment to transparency, fairness, and responsible political conduct. The findings also suggest that political communication in the digital era should prioritize openness and public engagement in order to reduce polarization and misinformation. From an academic perspective, this study contributes to discussions on democratic legitimacy by demonstrating that political ethics should be positioned as a central component in understanding the relationship between government performance and public confidence.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this research. This study was conducted using qualitative document analysis and relied primarily on secondary sources such as scholarly publications, policy reports, and media articles. Consequently, the analysis reflects interpretative findings rather than direct evidence gathered through fieldwork or participant interaction. In addition, the research focused specifically on contemporary political conditions in Indonesia, which may limit broader generalization to different political systems or contexts. Although the study applied thematic analysis and source triangulation to improve credibility, the possibility of subjective interpretation remains unavoidable in qualitative research. Therefore, the conclusions presented in this study should be understood within the scope and methodological boundaries of literature-based inquiry.

Suggestions

Future research should consider combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of public trust and political ethics in Indonesia. Empirical methods such as surveys, interviews, or focus group discussions may offer more detailed insights into how citizens perceive governmental legitimacy and ethical political behavior. Comparative studies involving other democratic countries could also help identify contextual factors influencing trust in political institutions.

Furthermore, policymakers are encouraged to strengthen ethical standards within governance through transparent decision-making, consistent legal enforcement, and improved public communication. Increasing digital literacy and civic education may also help society respond more critically to misinformation and political polarization in contemporary democratic environments.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the crisis of public trust in contemporary Indonesia is closely related to the weakening of political ethics within democratic governance. The findings demonstrate that corruption, limited transparency, political pragmatism, and the spread of misinformation through digital media have collectively contributed to declining confidence in governmental institutions. Beyond institutional performance, public distrust is strongly influenced by citizens' perceptions of moral inconsistency and the prioritization of elite interests over public welfare. The study also highlights that democratic procedures alone are insufficient to maintain legitimacy when ethical standards in political practice continue to deteriorate. In the Indonesian context, the challenges of democracy are therefore not only procedural but also ethical and cultural in nature. Strengthening accountability, encouraging transparent political communication, and reinforcing ethical leadership are essential steps toward rebuilding public confidence and supporting healthier democratic development. Ultimately, restoring trust requires a long-term commitment to integrating democratic values with ethical responsibility in both political institutions and public governance practices.

Author Contributions Statement

Fitri Ova Zahara contributed to the conceptualization of the study, literature review, data interpretation, and manuscript drafting. Nando Piska was responsible for data collection, thematic analysis, and methodological development. Rachel Tsabita contributed to data organization, manuscript editing, and reference management. Rudi Santoso, as the supervising lecturer, provided academic guidance, research supervision, critical review, and final evaluation of the manuscript. All authors discussed the results, contributed to the improvement of the article, and approved the final version of the manuscript before publication.

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