

## **FROM REPRESENTATION TO POLITICAL CONTRACTS: LEGITIMACY AND PEOPLE'S SOVEREIGNTY IN ELECTION BASED ON DELIBERATIVE PUBLIC SPACES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the tension between procedural legitimacy and substantive popular sovereignty in Indonesia's electoral democracy. Although post-authoritarian elections have become institutionally consolidated, they often prioritize formal vote aggregation over meaningful communicative engagement. This gap fosters clientelism, transactional politics, and weakened post-election accountability, reducing citizens to passive voters rather than active participants. Using qualitative library research, this study integrates Hanna Pitkin's theory of political representation and Jürgen Habermas's concept of the deliberative public sphere. It develops a conceptual framework reinterpreting elections as arenas for public reasoning and collective will formation. The findings suggest that procedural dominance weakens democratic legitimacy by separating electoral competition from rational deliberation. To address this, the article proposes a deliberative political contract-based model centered on three principles: informed consent, deliberative participation, and continuous accountability. Through this framework, citizens are positioned as active political subjects capable of shaping, monitoring, and evaluating binding political commitments. The study concludes that genuine democratic legitimacy requires evolving elections into deliberative spaces that encourage programmatic competition and enforceable accountability between representatives and citizens.

**Keywords: political representation, deliberative public space, political contract, democratic legitimacy, popular sovereignty**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Post-Reformasi Indonesia, following the country's democratic transition after 1998, is widely regarded as having achieved significant progress in electoral institutionalization, particularly through the implementation of direct elections at both the national and local levels. Electoral reforms introduced since 1999, including competitive multiparty elections, direct presidential elections beginning in 2004, and direct regional elections introduced in 2005, have expanded political participation and strengthened electoral competition procedures (Mietzner, 2013; Mujani, Liddle, & Ambardi, 2018). A number of scholars have identified Indonesia as one of the more successful democratic transition cases in Southeast Asia, largely because the country has maintained electoral stability and peaceful transfers of power despite persistent social and political fragmentation (Tomsa, 2010; Noor, 2012). From a procedural perspective, Indonesia may therefore be considered as having reached a relatively stable stage of electoral democratic consolidation.

At the same time, the consolidation of electoral institutions has prompted ongoing debates regarding the quality and substance of democratic legitimacy. In Indonesia, discourses surrounding electoral reform have concentrated primarily on institutional engineering, including electoral system design, parliamentary thresholds, campaign finance regulation, and administrative efficiency (Mietzner, 2013; Anggraini, 2019). Although these institutional dimensions remain important for safeguarding electoral integrity, excessive emphasis on procedural and technocratic aspects has often sidelined more substantive democratic questions, particularly regarding how popular sovereignty is meaningfully constituted through elections. Consequently, elections frequently operate merely as mechanisms for vote aggregation and elite legitimation rather than as arenas for collective will formation based on rational public deliberation.

This condition has stimulated broader theoretical debate concerning the relationship between political representation and democratic legitimacy. Classical theories of representation, particularly Hanna Pitkin's (1967) concept of representation, emphasize authorization and delegation, whereby citizens transfer political authority to elected representatives through elections. In this framework, electoral legitimacy primarily derives from the procedural validity of representation itself. However, contemporary democratic developments increasingly challenge the adequacy of procedural representation alone. Citizens today not only expect electoral authorization, but also demand responsiveness, policy consistency, accountability, and sustained public engagement from elected officials. Consequently, democratic relations increasingly resemble contractual expectations between citizens and political actors rather than purely symbolic forms of representation.

Theoretically, this debate reflects a shift from an electoral-representative model toward a more deliberative and accountability-oriented understanding of democracy. Whereas representative democracy prioritizes the legitimacy derived from electoral authorization, deliberative democratic theory places communicative justification and public reasoning at the center of legitimate political authority (Habermas, 1989; 1996). From Habermas's perspective, democratic legitimacy cannot rely solely on electoral procedures because legitimate political decisions must emerge through inclusive, rational, and discursive public communication. Elections, therefore, should function not merely as periodic voting events, but as institutional arenas in which citizens critically evaluate political programs, contest policy alternatives, and hold representatives accountable through publicly scrutinized commitments.

However, the relationship between representation and political contracts remains theoretically contested. Advocates of representative democracy argue that political representatives must retain autonomy in decision-making because rigid contractual obligations may undermine political flexibility and the trustee function of representation (Pitkin, 1967; Manin, 1997). Conversely,

critics contend that excessive autonomy often generates a legitimacy deficit because electoral representation becomes detached from citizens' substantive interests and public accountability. In contemporary democracies, this debate has become increasingly relevant as public distrust toward political elites grows alongside the expansion of transactional politics and oligarchic influence.

Empirically, Indonesia demonstrates this tension quite clearly. Various studies reveal that procedural electoral consolidation does not necessarily strengthen substantive representation. Electoral mobilization frequently relies on clientelism, patronage networks, vote buying, and candidate personalization rather than programmatic policy competition (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015; Muhtadi, 2019). Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) further demonstrate that informal brokerage networks continue to dominate electoral mobilization across many regions, thereby weakening ideological competition and long-term policy accountability. In many regional elections, voters are mobilized through short-term material incentives and personal proximity rather than through deliberative evaluation of policy agendas. As a result, electoral participation becomes quantitatively high but substantively shallow.

Moreover, Mietzner (2020) argues that Indonesia's democratic institutionalization has paradoxically coexisted with oligarchic adaptation, whereby political and economic elites successfully capture electoral mechanisms while formally maintaining democratic procedures. This phenomenon produces what may be described as "thin legitimacy": elections remain procedurally democratic, yet fail to generate substantive public control over political decision-making. Under such conditions, the representative relationship between citizens and elected officials becomes increasingly fragile because electoral authorization is not followed by enforceable political accountability.

Despite extensive research on Indonesian elections, most previous studies have examined electoral institutions, voter behavior, clientelism, or democratic consolidation as relatively separate analytical issues. Comparatively limited attention has been directed toward integrating representation theory with deliberative democratic perspectives to explain how electoral legitimacy might evolve beyond procedural authorization toward more binding forms of political accountability between citizens and representatives. Therefore, this article seeks to explain how electoral democracy can be reconstructed from a narrowly procedural model of representation into a deliberative political contract model capable of strengthening substantive popular sovereignty. Drawing on Pitkin's theory of representation and Habermas' conception of deliberative legitimacy (Habermas, 1989, 1996; Pitkin, 1967), the article argues that elections should be understood not merely as mechanisms for selecting political representatives, but also as deliberative institutional processes through which

communicative legitimacy and publicly accountable policy commitments between citizens and political actors are produced.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative library research design using a conceptual-normative approach. More specifically, it adopts a theoretical synthesis review aimed not simply at summarizing previous studies, but at critically comparing, interpreting, and integrating theoretical perspectives in order to develop a new analytical framework (Snyder, 2019). This approach is particularly relevant because the main problem addressed in this article concerns a theoretical and normative debate regarding the evolving relationship between political representation and political contracts within electoral democracy. Accordingly, the objective of the study is not to test statistical causal relationships, but rather to explain conceptual tensions, identify theoretical gaps, and formulate a normative model capable of strengthening substantive democratic legitimacy in Indonesian elections.

The methodological process was conducted through four interrelated stages. First, literature identification and selection were carried out by collecting primary and secondary scholarly sources relevant to the research problem. Primary theoretical references include Hanna Pitkin's theory of political representation (1967), Jürgen Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy and the public sphere (1989; 1996), as well as supporting theories on representative and deliberative democracy developed by Mansbridge (2003), Dryzek (2000), and Manin (1997). Secondary sources consist of empirical studies on Indonesian electoral democracy, particularly concerning clientelism, oligarchic politics, electoral legitimacy, and voter behavior (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Mietzner, 2020; Muhtadi, 2019). The selected literature was evaluated based on its conceptual relevance to the questions of democratic legitimacy and representative relations between citizens and elected officials.

Second, the study conducted conceptual mapping and analytical comparison. At this stage, key concepts, including representation; legitimacy; accountability; deliberation; sovereignty; and political contracts, were systematically compared to identify both convergences and tensions between representative and deliberative democratic theories. This analytical process aimed to clarify the central theoretical concern of the study, namely whether electoral legitimacy should be understood merely as procedural authorization through elections or as a substantive relationship grounded in communicative accountability and binding public commitments.

Third, the study employed critical interpretation and contextualization by relating theoretical debates to empirical problems within Indonesian electoral democracy. Empirical findings from previous studies regarding

clientelism, vote buying, patronage networks, political oligarchy, and weak programmatic competition were analyzed to demonstrate the limitations of procedural representation in producing substantive popular sovereignty. This stage is important because the study does not position theory as abstract speculation, but as an analytical instrument for explaining concrete democratic problems in Indonesia.

Fourth, the study conducted a normative synthesis by integrating theories of political representation and deliberative public space into a new conceptual framework termed *deliberative political contract-based elections*. Through this synthesis, elections are understood not merely as mechanisms for delegating authority, but also as deliberative institutional processes that generate communicative legitimacy, public accountability, and binding policy commitments between citizens and political representatives. Thus, this methodological approach enables the study not only to review existing theories, but also to formulate a normative model that responds to the empirical and conceptual crisis of legitimacy in contemporary electoral democracy.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The development of deliberative political contracts in contemporary electoral democracy cannot be separated from the transformation of democratic legitimacy itself. Classical democratic theory initially positioned elections primarily as mechanisms of political representation, through which citizens delegate authority to elected representatives via periodic voting. In this framework, legitimacy is derived mainly from electoral authorization. Hanna Pitkin (1967) conceptualized representation as a relationship in which representatives act on behalf of citizens after receiving democratic authorization through elections. Accordingly, elections function principally as instruments for transferring political authority from citizens to political elites.

Historically, this representative model was deeply influenced by the tradition of social contract theory. Thomas Hobbes viewed political contracts as mechanisms for establishing order and security through the transfer of authority to sovereign power. John Locke later reformulated this conception by arguing that political legitimacy depends on the protection of citizens' rights and that governmental authority remains conditional upon fulfilling public mandates. Jean-Jacques Rousseau further expanded this idea by emphasizing the "general will" as the collective expression of citizens participating in political life. Although these theories differed substantially, all shared the assumption that political legitimacy ultimately originates from the consent of the governed.

However, in modern electoral democracies, the meaning of political consent has undergone significant transformation. Representation alone is increasingly viewed as insufficient for producing substantive democratic

legitimacy. Contemporary democratic societies no longer merely demand authorization through elections, but also expect accountability, responsiveness, transparency, and measurable policy commitments from elected officials. Consequently, the relationship between citizens and political actors has gradually shifted from a purely representative relationship toward a more contractual expectation of politics.

This shift reflects a broader theoretical debate within democratic theory. Representative democracy traditionally prioritizes electoral authorization and elite mediation, whereas deliberative democracy emphasizes communicative justification and public reasoning as the foundation of legitimate political authority (Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2000). From a deliberative perspective, elections should not merely aggregate preferences, but should also facilitate rational public discussion concerning policy alternatives and collective interests. Therefore, democratic legitimacy depends not only on who wins elections, but also on how political preferences and public agreements are formed.

The tension between these two paradigms has become increasingly relevant in contemporary electoral democracies, including Indonesia. Procedurally, Indonesia has successfully institutionalized competitive elections since the 1998 Reformasi period. Electoral participation remains relatively high, with voter turnout in national elections generally exceeding 75 percent since 1999 (KPU, 2019). Indonesia has also maintained regular electoral cycles, peaceful transfers of power, and direct presidential and regional elections. These achievements are frequently regarded as indicators of successful democratic consolidation in Southeast Asia (Mietzner, 2013; Tomsa, 2010).

Nevertheless, empirical evidence suggests that procedural consolidation has not necessarily strengthened substantive representation. Several studies point to persistent problems of clientelism, oligarchic domination, vote buying, and weak policy-based competition within Indonesian elections. Aspinall and Sukmajati (2015), for example, found that vote-buying practices remain widespread in both regional and national elections, particularly in areas characterized by weak programmatic party competition. Muhtadi (2019) further demonstrates that voters in many electoral districts remain highly responsive to short-term material incentives due to limited political information and weak ideological differentiation among candidates.

In addition, Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) explain that electoral mobilization in Indonesia frequently depends upon informal patronage networks involving brokers, local elites, and personalistic relationships rather than policy programs. This condition weakens the substantive linkage between voters and elected officials because political support is built through transactional exchange rather than deliberative agreement. Consequently,

elections often function merely as mechanisms for mobilizing electoral support rather than arenas for rational public will formation.

The persistence of oligarchic influence further intensifies this problem. Mietzner (2020) argues that Indonesia's democratic institutionalization has paradoxically coexisted with oligarchic adaptation, whereby economic and political elites continue to dominate candidate recruitment, campaign financing, and policy agendas. As a result, electoral competition frequently revolves around elite bargaining and personal popularity rather than substantive policy contestation. Under such conditions, electoral legitimacy tends to become "thin legitimacy": elections remain procedurally democratic, yet fail to produce strong public accountability and substantive popular sovereignty.

This empirical reality indicates a deeper structural shift in democratic expectations. Citizens increasingly evaluate political actors not merely on the basis of symbolic representation or electoral promises, but also on their capacity to fulfill concrete commitments after elections. Public demands for anti-corruption reforms, transparent governance, participatory policymaking, and measurable policy outcomes indicate the emergence of a more contractual logic in democratic politics. In Indonesia, this tendency can be observed through the growing role of civil society organizations, media monitoring, fact-checking initiatives, and digital public scrutiny of elected officials' promises and policy performance.

However, despite these growing expectations, electoral institutions in Indonesia remain largely structured around procedural representation rather than binding political accountability. Electoral mandates are generally not accompanied by enforceable mechanisms requiring elected officials to fulfill campaign commitments. Once elections conclude, the relationship between citizens and representatives often becomes weakly institutionalized and episodic. In Pitkin's framework (1967), representation mainly concerns authorization, whereas contemporary democratic demands increasingly require accountability and continuous responsiveness beyond electoral moments.

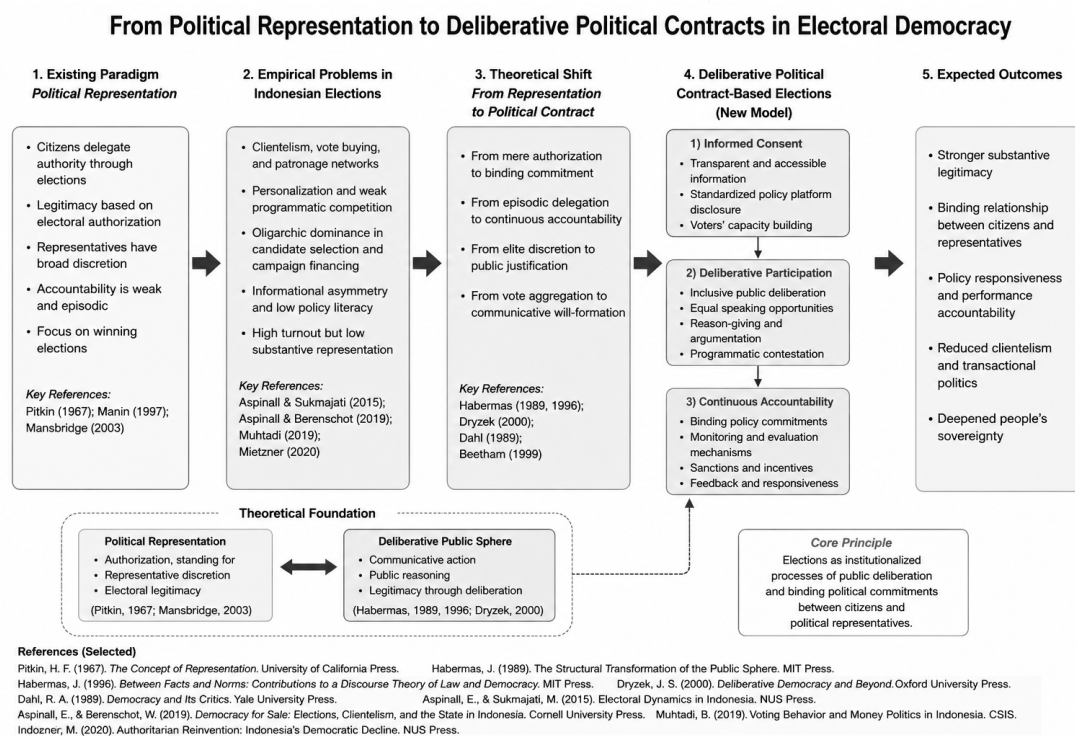
This condition demonstrates the need for a new framework capable of bridging the gap between representation and accountability. The concept of deliberative political contracts emerges as a response to both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of this problem. Rather than understanding elections solely as mechanisms of delegation, deliberative political contracts conceptualize elections as institutionalized communicative processes through which citizens and candidates publicly negotiate policy commitments through deliberative interaction.

Within this framework, legitimacy is not derived merely from electoral victory, but also from the quality of public reasoning and the binding character of political commitments formed during electoral processes. Deliberative

political contracts therefore integrate three interconnected principles: informed consent, deliberative participation, and continuous accountability. Informed consent requires transparent and accessible information regarding candidates' policy agendas. Deliberative participation requires inclusive public forums where citizens can critically evaluate competing programs. Continuous accountability requires mechanisms through which campaign commitments can be monitored and evaluated after elections.

Thus, the shift from political representation toward deliberative political contracts reflects not only a theoretical evolution, but also a response to the empirical limitations of contemporary electoral democracy. In the Indonesian context, this framework becomes increasingly relevant because procedural electoral consolidation alone has proven insufficient to strengthen substantive democratic legitimacy and popular sovereignty.

**Figure 1.**  
**The Transformation of Electoral Legitimacy: From Representation to Political Contracts**



This condition reflects a broader transformation in democratic expectations. In classical representative democracy, elections primarily functioned as mechanisms for authorizing political elites to govern on behalf of citizens. Contemporary democratic societies, however, increasingly demand not only representation, but also measurable commitments, transparency, and continuous accountability. Consequently, electoral legitimacy is no longer evaluated solely through procedural participation and electoral outcomes, but also through the extent to which elected officials fulfill publicly articulated

commitments. This transformation indicates a gradual shift from a purely representative model of democracy toward a more contractual and deliberative understanding of political legitimacy.

Empirical developments in Indonesia strongly illustrate this shift. Public dissatisfaction with elected officials frequently emerges not because elections are absent, but because campaign promises are perceived as symbolic and weakly enforceable after electoral victory. Survey findings from the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) and various public opinion studies indicate that public trust in political parties and representative institutions remains consistently lower than trust in non-electoral institutions such as the presidency or the military (Mujani, Liddle, & Ambardi, 2018). This declining trust reflects a widening gap between electoral authorization and substantive accountability. Citizens increasingly evaluate political legitimacy based on policy performance, anti-corruption commitments, and responsiveness to public demands rather than merely electoral mandates.

The emergence of digital political participation further strengthens this transformation. The expansion of social media, civic monitoring platforms, and digital activism has enabled citizens to continuously scrutinize elected officials beyond electoral periods. Platforms such as KawalPemilu, parliamentary monitoring initiatives, and fact-checking communities demonstrate that public expectations are shifting toward ongoing accountability and policy verification. In this context, citizens no longer act merely as passive voters who delegate authority every five years, but increasingly position themselves as active political stakeholders demanding transparency and fulfilment of public commitments.

However, existing electoral institutions remain insufficiently designed to accommodate this changing democratic relationship. Electoral competition in Indonesia still tends to prioritize candidate popularity, personal branding, and short-term mobilization strategies rather than programmatic deliberation. Campaign communication is frequently dominated by slogans, symbolic imagery, and emotional appeals instead of substantive policy discussion. Consequently, elections often fail to establish binding communicative relationships between candidates and citizens. This institutional weakness contributes to the persistence of transactional politics because voters lack reliable mechanisms for evaluating and monitoring policy commitments.

This practice demonstrates that candidate transparency constitutes an important element in strengthening electoral accountability. Studies on electoral integrity confirm that candidate disclosure is positively correlated with the quality of voter choice and public trust in elections (Norris, 2014). In the Indonesian context, administrative obligations already exist, but they are not yet fully oriented towards public deliberation. Vision and mission statements are often formalistic and are not presented in formats that facilitate meaningful public evaluation. Therefore, reorienting the function of

candidate documents from mere administrative requirements into instruments for public dialogue represents an important step in building a deliberative political contract.

The problem of informed consent remains a persistent weakness in electoral democracy. Mujani et al. (2018) show that although Indonesian voters are becoming more rational in evaluating political performance, limited information about candidates at the local level means that many voters still rely on social networks or personal connections. Meanwhile, Muhtadi (2019) found that under conditions of asymmetric information, vote buying becomes more effective because voters lack a sufficient basis for programmatic evaluation. These findings reinforce the argument that weak informational transparency contributes directly to the persistence of transactional electoral behavior.

The second principle is the institutionalization of deliberative forums that enable substantive exchanges of policy arguments. In Habermasian theory, democratic legitimacy depends on the existence of a public sphere that guarantees equal participation and the exchange of rational arguments (Habermas, 1996; Chambers, 2003). Without such forums, elections are easily reduced to competition of image-building and emotional mobilization. Comparative experience offers important lessons in this regard. The deliberative polling model developed by Fishkin (2009) shows that when citizens are provided with adequate access to information and structured spaces for discussion, their preferences become more reflective and policy-based. Similarly, various citizens' assembly experiments in Europe indicate that deliberative forums can improve the quality of public deliberation and the legitimacy of political decision-making (Farrell et al., 2019).

In the context of regional elections in Indonesia, the institutionalization of deliberative public spaces can be designed in a tiered and context-sensitive manner, for example through open dialogues with candidates at the subdistrict level, thematic public forums based on regional development issues, fact-checked policy debates, and hybrid public consultations conducted both offline and online. Forum models held in subdistrict halls, town halls, or public spaces such as city parks carry important sociological relevance because they situate electoral engagement within citizens' everyday social environments. At the same time, the integration of digital platforms such as YouTube livestreams or the official channels of election organizers can broaden inclusion and reduce barriers to participation. However, the expansion of digital democracy also reminds us that online participation must be accompanied by institutional moderation to prevent polarization and disinformation (Sunstein, 2018; Coleman & Moss, 2012). Therefore, the design of deliberative public spaces must prioritize the quality of discourse, not merely the quantity of participation.

The third principle at the core of this model is the binding of candidates' policy commitments through post-election monitoring mechanisms. In the Lockean tradition of social contract theory, the legitimacy of political power remains conditional upon the fulfillment of the public mandate. Research on pledge fulfillment demonstrates that when campaign promises are specifically documented and publicly monitored, the likelihood of fulfillment increases significantly (Thomson et al., 2017). Accordingly, deliberative political contracts must translate candidates' commitments into measurable matrices of campaign promises, vision-and-mission-based performance indicators, public monitoring dashboards, and periodic performance reports for elected officials.

Such mechanisms are important because one of the major weaknesses of Indonesian electoral democracy lies in the absence of institutional continuity between electoral campaign promises and governance evaluation. Once elections conclude, campaign commitments frequently disappear from formal public scrutiny. As a result, accountability becomes fragmented and largely dependent on informal political pressure rather than institutionalized monitoring. By contrast, a deliberative political contract framework seeks to transform campaign promises into publicly verifiable commitments that remain politically relevant throughout the governing period. In this sense, elections become not merely moments of political authorization, but institutionalized processes of communicative accountability that connect citizens and representatives through continuous democratic engagement.

**Table 1.**  
**Stages of the Candidate Profile Transparency Mechanism**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Operational Indicator</b>	<b>Measurement Method</b>	<b>Expected Democratic Effect</b>
Institutionalization of Public Forums	Mandatory public deliberation forums for all candidates	KPU regulations requiring scheduled forums at the provincial and regency levels	Equal communicative opportunities among candidates
Accessibility of Deliberative Spaces	Hybrid (offline–online) forums accessible to the public	Number of forums livestreamed and publicly archived	Broader voter inclusion and reduced informational inequality
Quality of Programmatic Debate	Structured debate formats emphasizing policy proposals	Content analysis of debate themes (policy vs. personality)	Shift from personalistic politics toward programmatic competition
Public Question Mechanism	Citizens permitted to submit verified questions	Proportion of citizen-generated	Strengthened bottom-up accountability

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Operational Indicator</b>	<b>Measurement Method</b>	<b>Expected Democratic Effect</b>
Moderation Standards	Appointment of independent and trained moderators	questions used in public forums Compliance checklists and observer reports	Fair and balanced deliberation
Inclusiveness of Participation	Representation of civil society groups, women, youth, and marginalized communities	Participant diversity index	More representative public sphere
Deliberation Transparency	Full recording and open archival access to deliberation sessions	Availability of public digital archives	Increased electoral trust
Follow-up Accountability	Post-election monitoring of commitments made during deliberative forums	Comparative tracking of commitments and policy realization	Strengthened political contract accountability

*Source: Adapted by the author from Pitkin (1967) and Habermas (1989).*

This is where the significance of deliberative political contracts becomes particularly evident. In conventional representative democracy, the relationship between citizens and political representatives is generally understood as episodic, occurring primarily during elections through voting and electoral authorization. However, contemporary democratic developments indicate that citizens increasingly expect a more continuous and binding relationship with elected officials. Political legitimacy is no longer assessed solely on whether representatives are formally elected, but also on whether they fulfill publicly articulated commitments and remain responsive throughout their term of office. Consequently, the relationship between voters and elected officials evolves from a purely representative linkage into a more contractual and accountability-based relationship.

This transformation can be observed empirically in Indonesia through growing public demands for policy consistency and post-electoral accountability. Civil society organizations, independent media, digital monitoring platforms, and anti-corruption movements increasingly evaluate political leaders based on the implementation of campaign promises rather than symbolic representation alone. Public criticism of elected officials often emerges when campaign commitments are abandoned after elections, indicating that citizens increasingly perceive electoral promises as moral and political obligations rather than merely persuasive campaign rhetoric. In this context, deliberative political contracts function as mechanisms for

institutionalizing continuity between electoral promises and governance performance.

The essence of political contracts therefore lies in aligning public expectations formed through deliberative processes with candidates' publicly documented commitments. Elections become institutional spaces in which policy agendas are debated, justified, and publicly negotiated before citizens. Through this process, legitimacy is strengthened because political authority is grounded not only in electoral victory, but also in communicative agreement and publicly scrutinized commitments. Consequently, the relationship between citizens and representatives does not end at the moment of voting, but continues through ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and public engagement.

Nevertheless, the transition from representative electoral politics toward deliberative political contracts faces substantial structural challenges in Indonesia. One major obstacle is the uneven distribution of political literacy and access to political information. Although digital participation has expanded significantly, many citizens still encounter difficulties in accessing reliable policy information and critically evaluating candidates' policy platforms. Empirical studies show that informational inequality continues to contribute to clientelistic mobilization and vote-buying practices, particularly in regions where programmatic political competition remains weak (Muhtadi, 2019; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). Under such conditions, deliberative forums risk being dominated by political elites, local brokers, or symbolic participation rather than substantive policy discussion.

Another challenge concerns the fragmentation of the public sphere in the digital era. Although social media platforms have expanded opportunities for political participation, they have also intensified political polarization, misinformation, and algorithm-driven echo chambers. Rather than facilitating the rational-critical debate envisioned in deliberative democratic theory, digital communication often encourages emotional mobilization and identity-based contestation (Sunstein, 2018). This condition complicates efforts to institutionalize inclusive and reasoned public deliberation within electoral processes.

In addition, elite resistance represents a significant institutional obstacle. Deliberative political contracts may constrain elite flexibility because they require candidates to commit publicly to measurable policy agendas that can later be monitored by citizens. In many cases, political elites benefit from maintaining vague campaign narratives and personalistic mobilization strategies because such ambiguity provides greater room for post-electoral bargaining. Consequently, there is a risk that deliberative mechanisms may be adopted only formally without substantially transforming underlying power relations. This phenomenon reflects what institutional scholars describe as institutional mimicry, namely the superficial adoption of democratic

procedures without corresponding changes in political practices and accountability structures.

Accordingly, the effectiveness of elections based on deliberative political contracts depends on several democratic prerequisites. First, electoral management bodies must possess sufficient institutional capacity and independence to facilitate transparent information disclosure, policy debates, and accountability mechanisms. Second, a strong civil society ecosystem is essential for sustaining public monitoring, voter education, and policy advocacy beyond electoral periods. Third, independent and credible media institutions play a central role in ensuring fact-based political communication and preventing the dominance of disinformation and populist manipulation. Without these supporting institutions, deliberative innovations risk becoming merely procedural additions to existing electoral systems rather than substantive mechanisms for strengthening popular sovereignty.

Ultimately, the shift from political representation toward deliberative political contracts should not be understood as a rejection of representative democracy itself, but rather as its democratic deepening. Elections remain essential mechanisms of political representation, yet their legitimacy increasingly depends on the extent to which they institutionalize communicative participation, policy accountability, and binding public commitments. In this sense, deliberative political contracts offer a normative framework for reconstructing electoral democracy so that citizens are positioned not merely as passive voters, but as active political subjects who participate continuously in the formation, evaluation, and oversight of public power.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article demonstrates that the main problem of Indonesian electoral democracy lies not in the absence of procedural democratic institutions, but in the widening gap between electoral representation and substantive democratic legitimacy. Although Indonesia has successfully consolidated competitive elections and maintained relatively stable electoral procedures after the Reformasi era, empirical evidence indicates that electoral democracy continues to be dominated by clientelism, vote buying, political personalization, patronage networks, and oligarchic influence. Studies by Aspinall, Berenschot, Muhtadi, and Mietzner consistently show that electoral mobilization in Indonesia often relies more heavily on transactional and personalistic mechanisms than on programmatic policy competition and rational public deliberation. Consequently, elections frequently function merely as instruments of political authorization and elite circulation rather than as arenas for collective will formation and substantive popular sovereignty.

The findings of this study also reveal an important theoretical debate concerning the transformation of democratic legitimacy. In the classical tradition of representative democracy, particularly in Hanna Pitkin's conception of political representation, democratic legitimacy is primarily grounded in electoral authorization through voting mechanisms. However, contemporary democratic developments increasingly challenge the adequacy of procedural representation alone. Citizens now expect transparency, policy responsiveness, measurable commitments, and continuous accountability from elected officials. This condition reflects a gradual shift from a purely representative understanding of democracy toward a more contractual and deliberative model of political legitimacy.

From the perspective of deliberative democratic theory, especially Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere, democratic legitimacy cannot rely solely on electoral procedures but must also emerge from inclusive, rational, and communicative public deliberation. The article argues that the dominance of procedural representation without meaningful deliberative engagement produces what may be described as "thin legitimacy," in which elections remain formally democratic while substantively weak in connecting citizens to political decision-making processes. In this context, the tension between political representation and political contracts becomes central to understanding the limitations of contemporary electoral democracy in Indonesia.

In response to this theoretical and empirical gap, this article advances the concept of deliberative political contract-based elections as a normative synthesis between representation and deliberation. This model reconceptualizes elections not merely as mechanisms for aggregating votes, but as institutionalized communicative processes through which citizens and political actors publicly negotiate accountable policy commitments. The analysis identifies three core principles underlying this model: informed consent, deliberative participation, and continuous accountability. Through these principles, elections are expected to strengthen substantive democratic legitimacy by institutionalizing transparency, public reasoning, and binding policy commitments between citizens and elected representatives.

Furthermore, the study finds that the institutionalization of deliberative political contracts requires several democratic preconditions, including transparent candidate information systems, inclusive deliberative public spaces, independent electoral institutions, active civil society participation, and credible media ecosystems. Without these supporting conditions, deliberative mechanisms risk becoming merely procedural innovations without substantive transformative impacts on political accountability.

Ultimately, this article concludes that strengthening Indonesia's electoral democracy requires a fundamental reorientation from procedural representation toward deliberative political contracts. Such a transformation

is necessary to bridge the gap between electoral legitimacy and substantive popular sovereignty by repositioning citizens not merely as passive voters, but as active political subjects continuously involved in the formation, evaluation, and oversight of public power. Nevertheless, this study remains conceptual and normative in nature. Further empirical research is therefore needed to examine the institutional feasibility, implementation mechanisms, and practical effectiveness of deliberative political contracts within Indonesia's electoral system and broader democratic governance.

## **DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

Generative AI tools were used in a limited capacity for language editing, translation refinement, and proofreading assistance. All scholarly interpretation, argumentation, and final manuscript validation remain the responsibility of the author(s).

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