

The Role of Political Culture in Forming Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Political culture plays a crucial role in shaping the character of citizen participation, including civic engagement. This study aims to analyze the relationship between political culture and civic engagement in the context of developing countries, particularly Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative approach and secondary data from various academic and policy sources, this study shows that a democratic, participatory, and inclusive political culture can strengthen civic engagement. Conversely, an authoritarian or patrimonial political culture tends to limit the space for citizen participation. This study also highlights the importance of political education, the role of the media, and social institutions in shaping a political culture conducive to civic engagement. The results of this study can serve as a reference for policymakers in designing strategies to increase public participation in a more meaningful and sustainable manner.

Keywords: *Political Culture, Civic Engagement, Citizen Participation, Democracy, Political Education*

INTRODUCTION

In the modern democratic era, civic engagement or *civic engagement* Civic engagement is one of the main indicators of the success of participatory and inclusive political development. Civic engagement encompasses all forms of citizen participation in social and political life, from volunteering and participation in community organizations to involvement in public policymaking (Putnam, 2000). However, this level of participation is inseparable from the influence of the political culture that exists and develops in a society. Political culture is a pattern of individual orientation toward the political system that reflects collective values, beliefs, and attitudes toward authority, power, and political participation (Almond & Verba, 1963).

In Indonesia, procedural democratic practices have progressed since the 1998 reforms, but the quality of public participation still faces serious challenges. The gap between electoral and deliberative participation, low trust in political institutions, and political apathy among the younger generation reflect a political culture that does not fully support healthy civic engagement. Although Indonesia has structurally adopted a democratic system, culturally, there are still residues of authoritarian, patron-client, and transactional political culture that shape passive, permissive, and pragmatic attitudes within society (Liddle, 1996; Aspinall & Mietzner, 2010). Political culture not only influences individuals' perspectives on power and authority but also determines how citizens understand their role as part of the political community. In societies with a participatory political culture, individuals feel a sense of responsibility and capability to participate in the political process. Conversely, in societies with a subordinate or passive political culture, citizen engagement tends to be minimal due to the psychological and structural distance between citizens and the state (Dwipayana, 2001). Therefore, it is important to examine how political culture in the context of Indonesia as a post-authoritarian democracy—influences the level and form of civic engagement that develops in society.

This study aims to explore the role of political culture in shaping civic engagement through a descriptive qualitative approach based on secondary data. The primary focus is on the relationship between dominant political cultural values and various manifestations of civic engagement in the public sphere, both formal and informal. Furthermore, this study also highlights elements that strengthen or hinder the process of cultivating civic engagement, such

as political education, the media, social institutions, and the role of political elites. The urgency of this study is not only academic but also practical, particularly in the context of strengthening substantial democracy, which goes beyond electoral procedures and is rooted in active, critical, and sustainable citizen participation. Amid increasing political polarization and the decline of global democracy, strengthening civic engagement is a key strategy for building a resilient, inclusive, and responsive civil society to the challenges of the times (Norris, 2011).

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between political culture and civic engagement in various national contexts. For example, Putnam (1993) in his study in Italy showed that differences in the performance of public institutions were strongly correlated with the strength of the civic culture of the society. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, several studies indicate that although political participation has increased quantitatively, it is still qualitatively overshadowed by reliance on figures, transactionalism, and weak deliberation (Buehler, 2013). This highlights the importance of a more in-depth analysis of the role of political culture in fostering quality civic engagement. Thus, this study hopes to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how political culture operates as a structure of meaning that shapes citizens' orientation toward participation. This understanding is crucial as a basis for developing political education strategies and strengthening civil institutions capable of developing citizens who are aware of their rights, responsibilities, and capacities in a democratic life.

Furthermore, the development of information technology and social media has also become a significant factor in the current dynamics of civic engagement. While digital media opens up broader spaces for citizen expression and mobilization, it also gives rise to shallow forms of engagement (slacktivism) and fosters identity polarization in the public sphere. Civic engagement is no longer confined to conventional forms of participation such as elections or involvement in community organizations, but has also expanded into new forms such as digital campaigns, online petitions, and virtual community-based collective action (Zuckerman, 2014). This situation challenges traditional understandings of the relationship between political culture and civic engagement, particularly in the context of an increasingly digitalized younger generation. Amidst these changes, Indonesia, as a country with a complex social, cultural, and historical political diversity, faces challenges in building a political culture that supports broad and deep civic engagement. The legacy of the authoritarian politics of the New Order has left a pattern of state-society relations that tend to be hierarchical and unequal, reflected in a weak deliberative culture and the dominance of patronage relations in local and national political life (Aspinall & Fealy, 2003). In this context, an important question that needs to be asked is to what extent is Indonesia's current political culture capable of supporting participatory and inclusive civic engagement?

In reality, there is a gap between citizens' capacity to actively engage in the public sphere and the political cultural structures that support that engagement. For example, many people still view politics as the domain of the elite, far removed from everyday life. Citizen engagement is often reactive—emerging in situations of crisis or acute dissatisfaction with the government—without continuity in the form of more organized and transformative participation. This highlights the importance of revitalizing political culture, which can facilitate the formation of civic engagement as a sustainable citizenship practice. On the other hand, the emergence of various community-based social movements, citizen initiatives in managing public spaces, and participation in environmental and social issues indicate the potential for vibrant and thriving civic engagement at the grassroots level. In the Indonesian context, this potential has been manifested in multiple forms across different regions and sectors of society. One prominent example is the environmental struggle of the Kendeng farmers in Central Java, who have consistently mobilized collective resistance against cement mining projects that threaten both ecological balance and local livelihoods. Their persistent protests not only reflect ecological concerns but also represent an assertion of citizens' rights to be actively involved in shaping

development policies that directly affect their lives. At the urban level, initiatives such as *Gerakan Indonesia Diet Kantong Plastik* have successfully mobilized citizens to take part in environmental awareness campaigns that influence both consumer behavior and local government regulations. Similarly, the spread of community literacy networks through *taman bacaan masyarakat* (community reading houses) demonstrates how ordinary citizens take the initiative to manage public spaces, reduce educational inequalities, and strengthen civic consciousness outside formal political institutions.

Beyond these initiatives, youth activism has also become a significant driver of contemporary civic engagement. The student-led movements of #ReformasiDikorupsi and #GejayanMemanggil in 2019, which mobilized tens of thousands of young people across Indonesian cities, illustrate how grassroots mobilization can emerge rapidly to demand accountability, transparency, and the protection of civil liberties from the state. These movements highlight the dynamism of a younger generation that is increasingly critical of political elites and willing to challenge state authority in defense of democratic principles. At the same time, the digital sphere has expanded the arena of civic engagement, enabling online petitions, social media campaigns, and virtual forums to flourish as alternative channels for expressing political aspirations. While some observers critique these forms of participation as “slacktivism” due to their fragmented and often episodic character, they nonetheless broaden the spectrum of engagement and provide entry points for citizens who might otherwise remain politically disengaged.

The Indonesian experience resonates with broader patterns observed in other developing democracies, where grassroots mobilization and cultural contexts significantly shape civic participation. For instance, in Brazil, participatory budgeting initiatives pioneered in Porto Alegre demonstrate how institutional reforms can integrate citizens directly into decision-making processes and strengthen trust in democratic institutions (Baiocchi, 2005). In Turkey, as Çarkoğlu (2007) notes, political culture continues to oscillate between authoritarian traditions and participatory impulses, resulting in fluctuating levels of civic engagement that depend heavily on state-society relations. Similarly, in India, grassroots mobilizations around environmental justice and anti-corruption movements, such as the Right to Information campaign, highlight the power of citizen initiatives to challenge entrenched political structures, even though they often face resistance from political elites (Jenkins & Goetz, 1999). In this regard, Indonesia’s civic activism demonstrates similar tensions between participatory impulses and structural constraints, yet its plural and post-authoritarian context gives it distinctive dynamics that deserve closer scholarly attention.

Taken together, these diverse practices reveal that civic engagement in Indonesia is neither marginal nor dormant; rather, it is an active and evolving force that takes shape through multiple pathways—from traditional street protests and local community organizing to digital activism and everyday acts of civic responsibility. What is crucial, however, is that these initiatives often grow organically from below and rely heavily on the energy and creativity of citizens themselves, rather than on top-down mobilization by the state. This underscores both the potential and the fragility of grassroots engagement: on the one hand, it represents an invaluable opportunity to cultivate a new political culture that is more open, horizontal, and inclusive of citizen participation; on the other hand, without systemic reinforcement in the form of supportive policies, accessible civic education, and robust protection of civil rights, such engagement risks being fragmented, co-opted, or even suppressed by political forces that perceive critical participation as a threat to their power.

Thus, this paper will examine in depth the role of political culture in shaping civic engagement in Indonesia, focusing on post-reform dynamics and the challenges faced in building healthy civic participation. By situating Indonesia within both local and global debates, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how political culture mediates grassroots civic

activism in developing democracies, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on participatory democracy and the strengthening of civil society.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, which, according to Creswell (2014), is designed to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups attribute to social or political phenomena. Sandelowski (2000) further emphasizes that descriptive qualitative studies aim to provide a comprehensive summary of events in the everyday terms of those events, enabling researchers to present findings that remain close to the data. In line with this, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that qualitative research is inherently interpretive and naturalistic, allowing scholars to examine phenomena in their natural settings and to interpret them through the meanings people attach to them.

This methodological orientation was chosen because it aligns with the objective of this research: to understand the dynamics of meaning, values, and practices of citizen political participation within the framework of a developing political culture. Unlike quantitative approaches that emphasize statistical measurement, qualitative descriptive methods enable the researcher to capture social and political realities holistically, highlighting symbolic and normative dimensions that shape civic engagement in Indonesia's post-reform context.

Types and Sources of Data

The type of data used in this study is secondary data, namely data obtained not directly from the field, but through documents, literature, and available sources. Secondary data was chosen because this research is theoretical and reflective, with a focus on extracting conceptual, normative, and discursive information related to political culture and civic engagement.

Secondary data sources in this study include:

- Academic literature: books, national and international journals relevant to the topics of political culture, civic engagement, democracy, and civil society;
- Policy documents: laws, government regulations, and official reports from state institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs);
- Mass media sources: news articles, opinions, and thematic reports from credible online media, which raise issues of citizen participation and local political dynamics;
- Research reports and institutional studies from think tanks, political research institutions, and civil society organizations, both national and international.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out using the method library research conducted systematically. This process includes searching, selecting, and organizing documents based on predetermined main themes. Literature sources were searched through academic platforms such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, JSTOR, and national journal portals such as Garuda and SINTA.

Source selection criteria include:

- Thematic relevance: only literature discussing political culture and civic engagement was selected;
- Academic quality: only sources from verified scientific publishers are used;
- Updates: priority is given to literature published in the last 15 years (2008–2023), except for classical works or fundamental theories;
- Contextualization of Indonesia: sources that provide empirical perspectives on Indonesia are prioritized to ensure local relevance.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data that has been collected is analyzed using the method qualitative content analysis. This analysis aims to identify patterns, categories, and themes that emerge from various related

text sources. This technique allows researchers to explore the implicit and explicit meanings of narratives about political culture and civic engagement, as well as how the two are interconnected within Indonesia's socio-political context.

The steps in the content analysis process include:

1. Data reduction: filtering the main information from a long text into important points that are relevant to the research focus.
2. Categorization: grouping information based on main themes such as: political culture of citizens, passive vs active participation, influence of political education, role of media, and patterns of citizen involvement.
3. Extraction of meaning: interpreting the relationships between concepts and trends that emerge from various sources.
4. Systematization of results: compile the findings in a conceptual framework that is in accordance with the problem formulation.

Data Validity and Validity

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study uses a triangulation source strategy. Triangulation is carried out by comparing and verifying data obtained from various sources: academic, policy, and media. Thus, the information collected does not come from a single perspective, but rather reflects the diversity of perspectives from state actors, civil society, and academic observers. In addition, the analysis process is carried out by considering Indonesian socio-political context, such as the history of authoritarian politics, democratic reforms, and the dynamics of post-1998 participation. Understanding this context is crucial to ensure that data interpretation is not disconnected from the realities that influence how citizens interact with the political system.

Reasons for Choosing the Method

The choice of a qualitative approach and the use of secondary data are based on two main reasons. First, because the focus of this research is to understand the meaning, patterns, and tendencies of political culture and civic engagement, which cannot be measured quantitatively. Second, because the issues studied are closely related to discursive and symbolic processes, a text-based qualitative approach is more appropriate for exploring these dynamics in depth. With this methodology, the research is expected to be able to provide analytical and theoretical contributions regarding the relationship between political culture and civic engagement, as well as open up space for critical reflection on the condition of democracy in Indonesia from the perspective of citizen participation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Political Culture in Post-Reformation Indonesia

Political culture is the collection of attitudes, orientations, and behaviors of citizens toward the political system that influence how they participate in political life (Almond & Verba, 1963). In Indonesia, after the 1998 reforms, political culture has undergone significant changes but also maintained a number of diverse and complex old patterns. According to Almond and Verba (1963), political culture can be categorized into three: political culture participatory, subject, and parochial. Indonesia practices all three types of culture simultaneously, which can be seen in the political behavior patterns of citizens in various regions and social classes.

This political culture participatory characterized by active citizen involvement in elections, social organizations, and decision-making processes. Examples include the increasing number of young voters and the emergence of various communities and NGOs actively advocating for socio-political issues (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). This phenomenon is also supported by the increasing development of education and access to information. However,

political culture subject passive or subordinate culture still dominates some levels of society, particularly in rural areas and low-educated groups. They tend to accept policies and authority without much active participation (Liddle, 1996). In this culture, citizens prefer to be passive observers and rely on political elites.

In addition, political culture, rooted in a patron-client system, remains strong, especially in local politics. Citizens base their political support on personal relationships and the exchange of material benefits (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2010). The practices of money politics and clientelism hinder the development of critical and independent political participation. Apart from these three types, a phenomenon has emerged apathetic political culture, especially among the younger generation. The Indonesian Political Indicators Survey (2021) noted that approximately 30% of young people are disinterested in politics due to disappointment and feelings of powerlessness. This phenomenon is dangerous for the future of democracy because it reduces participation and legitimacy.

Factors Supporting and Inhibiting Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is influenced by interrelated structural, cultural, and institutional factors. One of the main factors is political education. Effective political education can build political awareness, democratic values, and participation skills (Micheletti & Stolle, 2007). However, in Indonesia, formal political education remains inadequate and fails to address the fundamental needs of citizens (Putra & Susilo, 2019). The second factor is role of media as a source of information and a space for public discussion. Mass media and social media expand access to information but also present challenges such as hoaxes, polarization, and filter bubbles (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Sunstein, 2017). Indonesia is experiencing a wave of disinformation that is disrupting the quality of political dialogue and dividing the public sphere.

Inequality socio-economics has a significant impact. Lower-class citizens experience limited access to information, education, and social networks, which hinders participation (Verba et al., 1995). Geographical conditions and development disparities between regions exacerbate the inequality of political culture. Besides that, religiosity as part of social identity, it can be both a driver and a barrier to participation. Religious organizations often mobilize citizens to participate, but religious-based identity polarization can lead to exclusivity (Fealy & White, 2008).

Dynamics of Civic Engagement in the Digital Era

The digital era has revolutionized the way citizens participate. Social media and digital platforms enable broader and faster participation, such as online campaigns and electronic petitions (Zuckerman, 2014). However, the phenomenon of slacktivism giving rise to criticism that digital participation is often superficial without real impact (Morozov, 2011). Social media also fuels disinformation and digital radicalization, exacerbating polarization (Hasyim & Nugroho, 2020). Echo chambers and filter bubbles strengthen identity groups and hinder inclusive dialogue. In Indonesia, online political polarization is very evident, particularly during elections, when ethnic/religious identity issues become a source of tension (Lim, 2017). However, there are also positive opportunities such as online public consultation platforms that expand access to citizen participation, especially for those previously marginalized geographically and socially (UNDP, 2019).

Implications of Political Culture on Strengthening Democracy

A participatory political culture is crucial for a healthy and sustainable democracy (Norris, 2011). Strong civic engagement improves government accountability and the quality of decision-making. In Indonesia, strengthening a participatory political culture is a crucial strategy for addressing corruption, oligarchy, and political polarization. However, political cultural transformation is difficult to achieve without structural reform and strengthening democratic institutions. Oligarchic political elites often maintain their dominance by limiting spaces for

critical participation. Therefore, strengthening political education, responsible media, and autonomous civil society institutions is crucial for building an inclusive democracy.

Determinants of Civic Engagement in the Context of Political Culture

Political education serves as the foundation for developing a participatory political culture. A contextual curriculum and participatory learning are necessary for citizens to understand and actively contribute to politics (Micheletti & Stolle, 2007). Community-based youth training and political education programs are effective alternatives in Indonesia (Nugroho, 2018). CSOs play a vital role as mediators between citizens and the government and as spaces for political learning (Putnam, 2000). Professional and inclusive CSOs increase citizen participation and political awareness. The anti-corruption movement in Indonesia is an example of CSOs' success in strengthening social control over the government (Butt, 2015). Mass and social media shape public opinion and provide a space for discussion (McQuail, 2010). However, social media challenges such as disinformation, polarization, and hate speech must be addressed through media literacy and appropriate regulation (Sunstein, 2017).

Traditional values such as mutual cooperation and deliberation support collective participation (Geertz, 1960). However, ethnic and religious diversity also poses challenges to building an inclusive political culture (Mietzner, 2015). Youth is a highly strategic demographic group in shaping political culture and developing civic engagement. The younger generation has the potential to bring about significant socio-political change because they are typically more dynamic and open to new ideas (Putnam, 2000). However, surveys and research indicate a phenomenon of political indifference which is quite high among Indonesian youth, which is reflected in the low level of participation in elections and other political activities (Indonesian Political Indicators, 2021). This phenomenon can be linked to a sense of disappointment with corrupt and opaque political practices, as well as a lack of political education that inspires youth to be active (Mujani & Liddle, 2013). Therefore, an innovative and participatory approach to political education is crucial for reactivating youth political interest and building a sustainable participatory political culture. Political culture and civic engagement in Indonesia are also heavily influenced by local social structures and organizations. Political participation is not always national or formal, but also occurs through local community organizations such as religious groups, traditional organizations, and other social groups (Buehler, 2013).

These local democratic practices often serve as a gateway for citizens to learn to participate and organize more broadly. However, in some cases, local political dynamics remain mired in patronage and identity politics, which hinder the development of an inclusive and participatory political culture. Globalization has a dual impact on political culture and civic engagement. On the one hand, global flows of information and technology open up citizens' access to new sources of knowledge and models of political participation, enriching local political cultures (Held, 1999). However, globalization also poses challenges in the form of unequal access to technology, the penetration of individualistic values that may conflict with local collective values, and the potential for foreign cultural domination that erodes established local values (Appadurai, 1996). Therefore, it is important to manage global influences so as not to weaken a political culture that is contextual and responsive to the needs of Indonesian society.

One concrete example of strengthening participatory political culture is the emergence of the anti-corruption movement in Indonesia. This movement involves various civil society groups, students, and the media in overseeing the process of eradicating corruption and promoting transparency (Butt, 2015). This movement demonstrates how civic engagement can be an effective force of social control in a democracy. Citizen participation in oversight of state institutions increases accountability and encourages institutional reform. However, this movement also faces significant challenges, such as political pressure and the risk of criminalization of activists.

CONCLUSION

Political culture plays a central role in shaping civic engagement, which is an essential foundation for a healthy and sustainable democracy. This study reveals that in post-reform Indonesia, political culture is plural and complex, encompassing participatory, subject, and patrimonial patterns, as well as apathy that challenges the quality of democracy. Factors such as minimal political education, the dual role of the media, socioeconomic inequality, and the influence of religiosity and sociocultural contexts contribute to determining the level and quality of citizen participation.

Advances in information technology have opened new opportunities for inclusive digital participation, but also presented challenges such as disinformation and polarization. The role of civil society organizations and youth is crucial in actualizing civic engagement and monitoring the course of democracy. The anti-corruption movement is a concrete example of the success of strengthening citizen participation as a form of social control.

To enhance civic engagement, a holistic strategy is needed, encompassing contextual political education reform, strengthening responsible media, empowering civil society organizations, and managing the impacts of globalization while respecting local values. This will foster an inclusive, participatory, and critical political culture, which will strengthen democracy in Indonesia.

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