

Dynamics of Local Democracy as a Context for Civic Learning: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Direct regional elections (Pilkada langsung) have become a central mechanism of local democratization in Indonesia, aiming to enhance the political legitimacy and accountability of regional leaders. However, the extent to which direct elections contribute to accountable local leadership remains debated in the literature on local politics and governance. This article aims to examine the impact of direct regional elections on the quality of local leadership, with particular attention to political and governance accountability, through a literature-based analysis. This research method employs a qualitative approach using a semi-systematic narrative literature review of scholarly works discussing direct regional elections, local democracy, leadership, and accountability in Indonesia. The selected literature is analyzed thematically to identify dominant patterns, supporting factors, and structural constraints that shape leadership accountability in the post-election context. The research findings suggest that while direct regional elections enhance electoral legitimacy, they do not automatically translate into more accountable leadership. High political costs, entrenched patronage networks, and weak oversight institutions often weaken accountability mechanisms at the local level. These dynamics are highly relevant to understanding leadership challenges in a politically and economically complex region like Bekasi Regency. This article concludes that improving the quality of local leadership requires a broader institutional and political reform agenda beyond election procedures, emphasizing stronger accountability mechanisms, democratic oversight, and meaningful citizen participation in local governance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of direct regional elections (Pilkada) in Indonesia represents a significant milestone in the post-reform decentralization and democratization process. Through this mechanism, communities are given greater opportunity to directly elect their regional leaders, with the hope of realizing a more democratic, responsive, and accountable regional government. Direct elections are

viewed not only as an electoral procedure, but also as a political instrument to strengthen the legitimacy of regional heads' leadership and improve the quality of regional governance.

Within the normative framework of local democracy, direct elections are expected to create a stronger accountability relationship between regional heads and the community. Regional heads who receive a direct mandate from voters are assumed to have a greater incentive to govern transparently and responsibly. Therefore, direct elections are often associated with improved leadership quality, particularly in terms of leadership accountability to the public.

However, various studies indicate that the relationship between direct elections and leadership quality is neither linear nor automatic. A number of studies highlight that although direct elections successfully increase the political legitimacy of regional heads, this mechanism does not necessarily guarantee the realization of accountability and public-interest-oriented leadership. Factors such as high political costs, patronage practices, and weak oversight institutions often influence the leadership behavior of regional heads after being elected through direct regional elections.

In this context, the quality of regional head leadership needs to be understood more comprehensively, not only as a result of the electoral process, but also as a governance practice involving dimensions of political, administrative, and public accountability. The literature on public administration and governance positions accountability as a key element in assessing the quality of public leadership, as it is through accountability that power can be controlled and public interests protected.

Although considerable research has been conducted on direct regional elections and regional head leadership, most research focuses on case-based empirical studies or specific performance measurements. Furthermore, studies that regularly examine the literature to understand the patterns, debates, and conceptual implications of the impact of direct regional elections on the quality of regional head leadership, particularly in terms of accountability, are relatively limited. This situation suggests that there is academic space for a literature synthesis that can provide a more comprehensive and reflective understanding of this issue.

Bekasi Regency, as a region with urban-industrial characteristics and proximity to the Greater Jakarta metropolitan area, presents a relevant context for analyzing the dynamics of regional head leadership in the direct regional head election system. The region's social, economic, and political complexities demand regional leadership that possesses not only electoral legitimacy but also strong accountability in managing government and public services. Despite the ensnarement of two Bekasi Regents, the results of the 2017 and 2024 direct regional head elections, in succession, in corruption cases handled by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), Bekasi Regency is positioned not as an object of direct empirical observation, but rather as an analytical context for reflecting on the relevance of literature findings regarding direct regional head elections and the quality of regional head leadership.

Based on this background, this article aims to examine the relationship between direct regional head elections and the quality of regional head leadership through a literature review approach, focusing on the accountability aspect of leadership in Bekasi Regency. Through analysis of relevant academic literature and policy documents, this research is expected to provide a conceptual contribution to understanding the dynamics of regional head leadership after direct regional head elections and offer relevant policy implications for strengthening regional governance.

2. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach based on literature review, with a semi-systematic narrative literature review design. This approach was chosen to analyze direct regional elections (Pilkada) as a mechanism for local electoral democracy and its implications for the quality of regional head political leadership, particularly in terms of leadership accountability to the public. The research focuses on a conceptual and analytical understanding of local political dynamics, rather than empirically testing causal relationships.

The research data sources consist of articles from accredited scientific journals (SINTA 1–3 and international journals), academic books, and policy documents relevant to the study of direct regional

elections, regional political leadership, and accountability in the context of local democracy in Indonesia. The literature search was conducted through online databases such as Google Scholar and national journal portals, using keywords including direct regional elections, local democracy, regional political leadership, and leadership accountability.

The literature selection process was carried out in stages. The first stage was an initial identification of literature based on the relevance of the topic and the Indonesian political context. The second stage was a screening of the literature based on the suitability of the theoretical framework, the focus of the political analysis, and its contribution to the discussion of the quality of regional head leadership. The third stage involved an in-depth reading of the selected literature to ensure its direct relevance to the research problem formulation. Through this process, a number of primary literature sources were identified that served as the basis for the analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis from a political science perspective. The literature findings were grouped into broad themes reflecting the relationship between local electoral processes and the political leadership practices of regional heads, such as the dynamics of regional election competition, the political legitimacy of elected regional heads, and mechanisms of leadership accountability to the public. Each theme was analyzed interpretively to identify argumentation patterns, differing theoretical perspectives, and trends in local democracy studies in Indonesia.

To maintain the rigor and credibility of the analysis, this study emphasized the consistent use of scientific sources, transparency in the literature selection process, and caution in drawing conclusions. Therefore, the research findings are positioned as a synthesis and critical reflection of the political science literature, rather than as empirical generalizations or direct causal claims regarding the impact of direct regional elections on the quality of regional head leadership.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Direct Regional Elections and the Dynamics of Local Electoral Democracy

The literature synthesis indicates that direct regional elections are understood as a primary instrument of electoral democracy at the local level, aimed at strengthening the political legitimacy of regional heads. Through direct elections, regional heads obtain an electoral mandate from the public, which is normatively expected to increase leadership accountability to the public.

However, political science literature confirms that procedural democratization through regional elections does not automatically result in improved leadership quality. In Indonesian local political practice, regional election competitions often take place within power structures still influenced by patronage, money politics, and local elite networks. As a result, regional elections function more as an arena for contesting power than as a mechanism for selecting leaders based on leadership capacity and integrity.

These findings indicate that the effectiveness of direct regional elections as an instrument of democracy is highly dependent on the surrounding local political context.

Leadership Quality of Regional Heads Post-Regional Election

The literature shows that regional heads elected through direct elections tend to have a strong orientation toward electoral legitimacy. This encourages responsiveness to public opinion and the use of intensive political communication strategies. In some cases, this responsiveness is manifested through populist policies and performance image-building efforts.

On the other hand, post-election political pressure often pushes regional heads to prioritize power consolidation and political stability. Dependence on the nominating party and support network influences strategic decision-making, resulting in leadership quality that is more pragmatic and short-term oriented. The literature confirms that leadership quality is determined not only by the election mechanism but also by post-election power relations.

Leadership Accountability in the Context of Bekasi Regency

Leadership accountability is an important dimension in assessing the impact of direct regional elections. Theoretically, regional elections create electoral accountability mechanisms through the possibility of political sanctions in subsequent elections. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is highly dependent on the quality of political participation and the capacity of oversight institutions.

In the context of Bekasi Regency, literature and academic reports indicate that regional elections take place within a complex local political landscape, characterized by elite competition and economic interests. This condition often results in leadership accountability being formal and symbolic. Regional heads tend to be more politically accountable to their political parties and supporting coalitions than directly to the public. This weak accountability in Bekasi Regency is reflected, among other things, in the ensnarement of two Bekasi Regents, the result of the 2017 and 2024 direct regional elections, in consecutive corruption cases handled by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK).

This discussion emphasizes that the impact of direct regional elections on leadership quality in Bekasi Regency is conditional. Elections provide electoral legitimacy, but leadership quality and accountability are largely determined by the evolving configuration of power and local political practices.

Analytical Conclusion

Direct regional elections are a prerequisite for local democracy, but they do not automatically guarantee the quality of regional head leadership. Leadership quality and public accountability are shaped through the interaction between electoral mechanisms and the local political context..

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the literature synthesis and discussion, this study concludes that direct regional elections (Pilkada) are an important instrument of electoral democracy in Indonesian local politics. However, their impact on the quality of regional head leadership is not automatic or linear. Direct elections provide formal political legitimacy to elected regional heads, but this legitimacy is not necessarily accompanied by strengthened leadership quality and substantive accountability to the public.

The literature shows that the quality of regional head leadership post-Pilkada is strongly influenced by the local political context, including the configuration of power, relations between political elites, and the dynamics of party support and support networks. In a context like Bekasi Regency, direct elections function more as an arena for contesting power than as a mechanism for selecting leadership based on capacity and integrity. As a result, leadership practices tend to be pragmatic and oriented towards short-term power consolidation.

From a political science perspective, these findings highlight the gap between electoral and substantive accountability. While direct elections provide a formal accountability mechanism through elections, their effectiveness in promoting accountable leadership depends heavily on the quality of public political participation and the capacity of oversight institutions at the local level. Thus, the accountability of regional head leadership is not solely determined by electoral procedures, but also by the political practices that develop after the elections. Overall, this study confirms that direct regional elections are a prerequisite for local democracy, not a guarantee of quality leadership. Therefore, efforts to strengthen local democracy need to be directed not only at implementing procedural elections, but also at improving local political structures and practices to enable more accountable and public-interest-oriented regional leadership.

Based on the findings of this study, the policy implication that can be drawn is the need to strengthen the local democratic ecosystem post-election, not merely improving the procedural aspects of elections. These efforts include strengthening the role of political parties in developing regional leadership, increasing transparency and access to public information, and optimizing the function of

formal oversight institutions and civil society participation. By strengthening political control mechanisms beyond electoral momentum, direct regional elections have the potential to be more effective in promoting accountable and responsive regional head leadership to the public interest.

The limitation of this research is that the use of the literature review method causes the findings of this research to depend on the scope and depth of the sources analyzed, so it is not intended to describe empirical conditions directly in the field. Further research is recommended to develop an empirical case study approach by utilizing primary data through interviews, observations, or analysis of regional policy documents to deepen understanding.

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