

Digital Populism and the Erosion of Public Trust in Democratic Institutions in Indonesia

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Abstract

The degradation of contemporary democratic quality has increasingly manifested through the rise of digital populism and the declining level of public trust in state institutions. This study aims to examine how populist discourse constructed in social media shapes citizens' perceptions of democratic legitimacy and contributes to the erosion of institutional trust. A qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach was applied, drawing on data from active social media users, civil society activists, academics, and journalists. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital document analysis, and non-participant observation of discursive interactions in online political spaces. Thematic analysis indicates that digital populism operates as a sphere for articulating public dissatisfaction with political elites and democratic procedures, expressed through moralistic narratives, issue simplification, and institutional delegitimation. The circulation of biased information and echo-chamber dynamics reinforces structural distrust and weakens procedural democratic legitimacy. These findings reveal that democratic backsliding occurs within the domains of discourse, political perception, and citizens' trust relations toward public institutions.

Keywords: Contemporary Democracy, Digital Populism, Public Trust, Social Media, Institutional Legitimacy.

Abstrak

Degradasi kualitas demokrasi kontemporer semakin tampak melalui menguatnya populisme di media sosial serta menurunnya kepercayaan warga terhadap institusi publik. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana konstruksi wacana populisme digital membentuk persepsi warga terhadap legitimasi demokrasi dan memicu erosi kepercayaan publik. Pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-interpretatif digunakan dengan sumber data yang mencakup pengguna aktif media sosial, aktivis masyarakat sipil, akademisi, dan jurnalis. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, analisis dokumen digital, dan observasi non-partisipatif atas interaksi diskursif di platform media sosial. Hasil analisis tematik menunjukkan bahwa populisme digital berfungsi sebagai ruang artikulasi ketidakpuasan warga terhadap elite dan prosedur demokrasi, yang diekspresikan melalui narasi moralistik, penyederhanaan persoalan politik, dan delegitimasi institusi. Sirkulasi informasi yang bias dan pembentukan echo chamber memperkuat distrust struktural serta melemahkan legitimasi prosedural demokrasi. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kemunduran demokrasi terjadi pada ranah wacana, persepsi politik, dan relasi kepercayaan warga terhadap institusi publik.

Kata kunci: Demokrasi Kontemporer, Populisme Media Sosial, Kepercayaan Publik, Institusi Publik, Erosi Legitimasi.

INTRODUCTION

The development of contemporary democracy in various countries, including Indonesia, demonstrates a growing tendency toward a decline in the quality of democracy, characterized by

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increasing political polarization, the personalization of leadership, and a shift in the orientation of citizen participation toward digital spaces. One indication of this decline can be seen in how ruling regimes exercise power by eliminating the very essence of democracy itself. Social media is no longer merely a means of exchanging information, but has transformed into an arena for the formation of public opinion, the articulation of aspirations and aggregation of interests, as well as the reproduction of populist sentiments.

This contestation of narratives is marked by the emergence of various information asymmetries between government institutions and public trust. Robert Dahl, through *On Democracy*, argues that within a democracy, opinions and information are indispensable elements of democratic practice (1998:7). On the other hand, the reality of social media has shaped information exchange through platforms that are currently used as mediums for exchanging information and opinions, which have been disrupted by the massive spread of disinformation. This pattern demonstrates that in Indonesia, the electoral democratic process reveals that social media has become a tool for information dissemination (Tapsell, 2017).

Various governmental dynamics are shaped through the diverse information presented to the public. A number of studies in Indonesia indicate that the intensity of political information consumption on social media influences the formation of citizens' perceptions of democratic issues, public trust, and the legitimacy of state institutions (Putri & Astini, 2024). The communication patterns established by the government toward the public, particularly through social media, have a significant impact on public trust. For instance, President Prabowo's communication patterns on several occasions, particularly his remarks concerning "Ndasmu" and "Londo ireng," have generated public sentiment in which these statements have been interpreted as being anti-criticism toward his critics. These expressions clearly represent a communication pattern that reflects the government's instruments and constitute one of the factors underlying the inability to manage communication styles, which in turn has implications for the decline of the essence of democracy. Larry Diamond's explanation in his research states that one of the indications of democratic decline cannot be separated from the deterioration of the substance of democracy itself (2020).

Populism in politics is a phenomenon that can trigger democratic decline because political actors use populist issues as instruments of campaign propaganda. It is therefore not surprising that when such political agendas are promoted by political actors in a context where our political literacy remains relatively low, populism becomes a sufficiently effective instrument, particularly when supported by massive campaigning through digital media. The emergence of populism over the past decade has involved claims of representing ordinary people who are oppressed by political elites in economic, political, social, and cultural aspects. In its form, populism divides society into two categories, namely the rhetoric of the pure people and the corrupt elite. Therefore, populism views politics as the common will of the people without dividing political interests (Mudde, 2004).

Although it is not uncommon to find that, in the current context, populist practices have become a fairly effective strategy employed by political elites to frame their campaigns through populist programs rather than offering substantive ideas. These populist campaigns continue to be disseminated through digital media as a medium capable of generating public sympathy.

In this context, digital populism has strengthened as a governmental communication strategy that utilizes moralistic narratives of the people versus the elite, the simplification of structural problems, and the polarization of political identities in online spaces. Social media provides a space for the circulation of resistance discourse toward political elites, government performance, and formal democratic procedures, which at a certain point can encourage the emergence of citizens' sense of alienation from public institutions (Kasanova & Rudiyanto, 2024). This phenomenon has implications for a shift in the

relationship of trust between citizens and the state, which is influenced not only by institutional performance but also by the construction of political discourse produced and reproduced within the digital ecosystem, both in the context of relations between the government and the governed and within the broader sphere of relations among citizens themselves.

The increasingly declining substantive democracy in Indonesia is significantly influenced by patterns created by both political elites and the patterns shaped by political culture that construct Indonesia's political image. The downward trend in Indonesia's democracy index over the past decade continues to raise concerns. A report published by The Economist Intelligence Unit in 2025 indicates that Indonesia's democracy score reached 6.44 on a scale with a maximum score of 10. The assessment of this index is based on several aspects, particularly those related to political culture and civil liberties. This score places Indonesia at 59th among the 167 countries measured by the index (Kompas, 2025).

A number of recent studies have shown that declining public trust in state institutions correlates with the expansion of disinformation, informational bias, and dynamics on social media that reinforce political prejudice and delegitimizing sentiments (Silvia, 2024). The distrust that emerges is not merely situational but develops into structural distrust associated with perceptions of injustice, the absence of the state, and disappointment with the performance of public governance (Suriadi, 2025).

This study also utilizes several previous literature studies as a foundation for determining the novelty of the research conducted. For instance, a study conducted by Kris Ruijgrok et al. (2026), *Influence Operation 2.0: The Evolution of Social Media Manipulation in Southeast Asia*, found a shift from state-led campaigns toward a broader diversity of clients, with the implementation of IO increasingly outsourced to private companies and freelancers. Significant changes have also occurred in the use of social media accounts. Rather than relying on large numbers of bot-like accounts, influence operations have adopted more sophisticated approaches. In addition, content strategies have also evolved. Instead of merely repeating messages aligned with the state, modern IO now utilizes data analytics to tailor content to specific audiences, often by reframing news rather than directly disseminating disinformation.

Research conducted by Risky Abdilah (2025), *Komunikasi Politik Populisme Digital: Analisis Semiotika Pencitraan Pemimpin Daerah dalam Membangun Kepercayaan Publik di Era Post-Truth*, found that public trust is built not primarily through the rational delivery of policy information, but rather through a consistent process of symbolization and emotionalization of meaning.

As a political ideology, populism poses a significant and concrete threat to democracy because, in addition to emphasizing the figure of the elite, populist actors also combine the logic of constructed narratives in ways that enable society to become immersed in the narratives they promote. This becomes even more dangerous when such narratives are constructed on the basis of fictitious rhetoric. The emergence of Jokowi in the national political landscape in 2014 marked the development of a populist campaign that associated him with the *wong cilik*—portraying himself as simple and concerned with ordinary people. This practice of populism has continued to be employed to convince the public to stand together as ordinary people opposing elite hegemony, even though, after being elected and assuming office, he himself became part of the political elite. Therefore, populism constitutes a flexible form of political communication that can be employed not only by the opposition but also by those in power (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019).

Understanding the logic of populism requires a comprehensive perspective, as American political scientist Francis Fukuyama has stated that the presence of populism within a political system never occurs in isolation. Political elites employing populist rhetoric always convey pragmatic messages, meaning that their political messages are consistently framed through the language of a common enemy. This approach is used to strengthen support bases and group identities in order to mobilize mass groups (Laclau, 2005;

Mudde, 2004). When compared with the United States, the presence of populism is shaped through networks of opposition among elites. In Indonesia, these populist networks are formed through coalitions among elites by framing various programs (Mietzner, 2015).

This demonstrates that the degradation of democratic quality does not always occur through formal institutional changes, but rather through transformations in perceptions, citizens' political experiences, and the weakening of procedural legitimacy.

However, most studies examining the relationship between social media, populism, and public trust remain dominated by quantitative approaches that focus on correlations between variables, while the dimensions of meaning, citizens' subjective experiences, and the construction of political discourse in digital spaces have not yet been extensively explored. In fact, citizens' interpretations of democracy, trust, and their relationship with public institutions are contextual and shaped through complex discursive interactions (Junaeda & Khaerunnisa, 2024). This is where the relevance of a qualitative approach becomes important in exploring how digital populism is perceived, interpreted, and articulated by citizens in their everyday political interactions.

Based on these conditions, this study aims to analyze how social media populism influences the erosion of citizens' trust in public institutions and shapes their perceptions of the legitimacy of contemporary democracy. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the construction of meaning, experiences, and political narratives among citizens regarding digital populism, institutional distrust, and their implications for the quality of democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Populism and Government Communication on Social Media

In the development of contemporary democracy, digital populism occupies an important position as a political communication strategy that utilizes social media as a space for the articulation of political discourse, the mobilization of support, and the reframing of relations between the people and the elite. Populism is understood not only as a political style but also as a communication practice that constructs moralistic narratives, simplifies political issues, and creates symbolic opposition to formal democratic institutions (Thahirah et al., 2025). Studies on digital populism in Indonesia indicate that political actors, including influencers and public figures, play a significant role in reinforcing populist sentiments through the production of emotional and confrontational rhetorical content in social media spaces (Puspitasari, 2024).

Within the framework of government, political rhetoric grounded in the people–elite dichotomy and narratives of injustice becomes increasingly intensified when constructed within a post-truth context, in which facts and rational arguments are often replaced by emotions and subjective perceptions (Deha, 2021). This has an impact on the formation of political communication patterns that tend to polarize the public and encourage the delegitimization of democratic institutions. From a broader perspective, digital populism is regarded as a potential threat to democratic consolidation because it correlates with the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies and the delegitimization of mechanisms of political representation (Anggraeni et al., 2023). Therefore, digital populism needs to be understood not only as a phenomenon of political communication but also as a process of discourse production that has implications for citizens' relations of trust and the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Social Media, Echo Chambers, and Political Discourse Polarization

Social media creates an interactive space that enables individuals to select, consume, and participate in information exchange according to their political preferences. However, algorithmic

mechanisms and users' selective behaviors ultimately give rise to the phenomenon of echo chambers, a condition in which individuals are exposed only to information and perspectives that are consistent with their existing beliefs. A study of comment interactions on the Turnbackhoax account indicates that the formation of echo chambers reinforces perceptual biases and facilitates the reproduction of post-truth discourse in public discussions (Gustin et al., 2024). In this context, social media serves not only as an arena for information exchange but also as a space for reproducing false consciousness regarding political and democratic issues (Hasibuan et al., 2025).

This phenomenon is further reinforced by the dynamics of political discourse polarization that occur through the segmentation of online groups, in which digital interactions construct symbolic boundaries between groups of users. Other research indicates that patterns of social media user communication within political comment spaces tend to reinforce group opinions and generate resistance to countervailing information (Alfifa et al., 2025). This condition contributes to the increasingly limited space for public deliberation and restricts the possibility of democratic dialogue. On the other hand, the challenges of addressing misinformation and information manipulation within the digital ecosystem require the integration of communication ethics and stronger regulations to protect the quality of the digital public sphere (Delima & Sazali, 2025). Thus, the polarization of political discourse on social media cannot be separated from the configuration of digital information structures that influence citizens' perceptions, preferences, and political attitudes.

Public Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Public trust in institutions, particularly government institutions, is one of the main pillars of democratic legitimacy. In the Indonesian context, discussions of democracy and popular sovereignty place citizens' trust as the foundation of the relationship between the state and society (Noor et al., 2023). Democracy is measured not only through electoral procedures but also through the moral legitimacy and public trust in state institutions. A number of studies emphasize that contemporary democratic dynamics face the challenge of inconsistencies between institutional performance and perceptions of public trust (Rizal & Wondabio, 2023).

In situations of governance crises, the dominance of political interests in public policy has the potential to erode the sense of social justice and trigger the erosion of institutional legitimacy (Kintawan & Kuswanto, 2025). The erosion of public trust becomes increasingly pronounced when cases of fraud, abuse of authority, or ethical violations occur repeatedly within the government sector (Rosidah et al., 2024). This condition demonstrates a close relationship between citizens' social experiences, governance transparency, and the formation of public trust. Therefore, several studies have emphasized the urgency of establishing ethical instruments for state officials as an effort to restore legitimacy and reconstruct public trust (Purwantoro et al., 2025).

From the perspective of normative democracy, public trust serves as an important indicator of the sustainability of political legitimacy and the quality of state–citizen relations. When trust weakens, the democratic process is threatened not only at the procedural level but also in its moral, symbolic, and affective dimensions.

Research Framework

The research framework is constructed by integrating three main areas of study, namely:

1. the concepts of democracy and citizens' political participation,
2. digital populism and the construction of political discourse on social media, and
3. the erosion of public trust in state institutions (government).

Studies on democracy emphasize that contemporary democracy faces structural and cultural challenges, including changes in patterns of political participation and shifts in civic orientations within digital spaces (Rahmatullah et al., 2024; Ulfyyati et al., 2023). Democracy is no longer practiced solely within formal institutional spaces but also through the contestation of discourse that takes place on social media. This is consistent with the perspective that views democracy as a system that continues to evolve, both in its institutional dimensions and in social praxis (Sholikin, 2021).

On the other hand, digital populism is understood as a communication practice that shapes citizens' perceptions of the state, political elites, and democratic procedures through moralistic and symbolic narratives. Discursive interactions on social media subsequently facilitate the formation of echo chambers, the polarization of political discourse, and the potential reproduction of distrust toward public institutions.

Thus, the analytical framework of this study positions:

1. digital populism as a discursive variable,
2. social media as an arena for the production of meaning, and
3. public trust as a dimension of democratic legitimacy,

which are interconnected in shaping citizens' political experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward public institutions.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach oriented toward understanding the meanings, experiences, and constructions of social discourse developed by citizens regarding digital populism, social media, and trust in public institutions. This approach was selected because the phenomenon under investigation is not only related to empirical relationships between variables but also concerns processes of subjective interpretation, the formation of political perceptions, and the articulation of social narratives that develop within digital communication spaces. The research was conducted within the context of the discursive space of social media in Indonesia, particularly on platforms with high levels of political interaction such as Instagram, X/Twitter, and Facebook. These platforms are viewed as arenas for the circulation of digital populist discourse, the exchange of political opinions, and the formation of public perceptions regarding democracy, state legitimacy, and the performance of public institutions.

The research data sources consist of active social media users involved in online political discourse, civil society activists, academics and public policy observers, as well as journalists and information literacy practitioners. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria of involvement in the consumption or production of digital political discourse, reflective experience concerning issues of public trust and democracy, and active participation in social media-based political interactions. The process of determining informants was continued through snowball sampling until the data reached thematic saturation (data saturation). The number of informants is expected to consist of academics, literacy practitioners, and activists. The informants are expected to provide diverse perspectives on the impact of digital populism in contributing to the erosion and degradation of democracy in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media Populism as a Space for Citizens' Symbolic Resistance

The research findings indicate that social media functions as a space for the articulation of citizens' symbolic resistance toward the state, political elites, and power structures, particularly those represented by the government. Narratives emerging in digital spaces largely express dissatisfaction, moral anger, and

disappointment with the performance of public institutions. Citizens use satirical language, political metaphors, and various forms of cultural expression as mediums of criticism and resistance. This practice can be observed in the representation of criticism through short-form video content, creative posts, and public comments that position themselves as the voice of the people challenging the dominance of power (Nigsih et al., 2025). This pattern demonstrates that social media has become not merely a medium of political communication but has transformed into an arena for the production of collective identities based on a sense of oppression.

In the context of digital populism, citizens perceive social media as an alternative space for negotiating power relations and voicing injustice. It also serves as a means of communication through which public aspirations can be conveyed to the government. The narratives constructed tend to establish dichotomies between the people and the elite, the state and society, as well as morality and power. Public criticism in social media spaces once resonated through the #IndonesiaGelap movement from 17-2-2025 to 18-2-2025. This hashtag ranked first, with the number of posts reaching 668,000 tweets. The use of this hashtag on social media served as a symbol of political resistance, demonstrating the power of the public in responding to the social realities taking place around them.

As a form of political resistance occurring on social media, society views this movement as an effort that creates an opportunity for political education and raises public awareness of the importance of politics in people's lives. Political activity should not be confined merely to the context of citizens' participation in the five-year democratic electoral process; rather, its essence also encompasses the responsibility of citizens to act as watchdogs over those in power who have been entrusted with public authority.

This is consistent with previous research findings indicating that populism in Indonesia has strengthened as a response to public dissatisfaction and has the potential to trigger social polarization (Budiman, 2021). Thus, social media populism operates not only as a political discourse but also as a form of citizens' symbolic resistance in responding to experiences of marginalization and alienation from formal democratic processes.

Institutional Delegitimization and the Public Trust Crisis

The research data indicate that the erosion of public trust in institutions is not solely caused by aspects of bureaucratic performance, but is also related to the social experiences of citizens who feel that they do not receive adequate protection, justice, and representation. Citizens frame distrust as an accumulation of disappointment with public policies, the exercise of power, and the moral inconsistencies of state officials. This crisis of trust becomes increasingly pronounced when economic issues, fiscal policies, and social inequalities are perceived as failing to serve the public interest, thereby triggering expressions of collective criticism both in digital spaces and through social actions (Musyrifah & Edtiyarsih, 2025).

A survey conducted by Poltracking Indonesia from 14-20 August showed that the level of public trust in the Prabowo Subianto-Gibran Rakabuming Raka administration stood at approximately 63.2%. This figure was calculated based on various respondents, with 32.5% expressing dissatisfaction with the performance of the Prabowo-Gibran cabinet. This figure clearly indicates a significant decline compared with 2025, when the level of public trust remained at 81.5% (figure 1).

These figures have been able to remain at this level to date because populist programs implemented by government institutions continue to be carried out extensively. Concrete examples include the Free Nutritious Meals policy and the Merah Putih Cooperatives, which have become flagship populist programs of the Prabowo-Gibran administration.

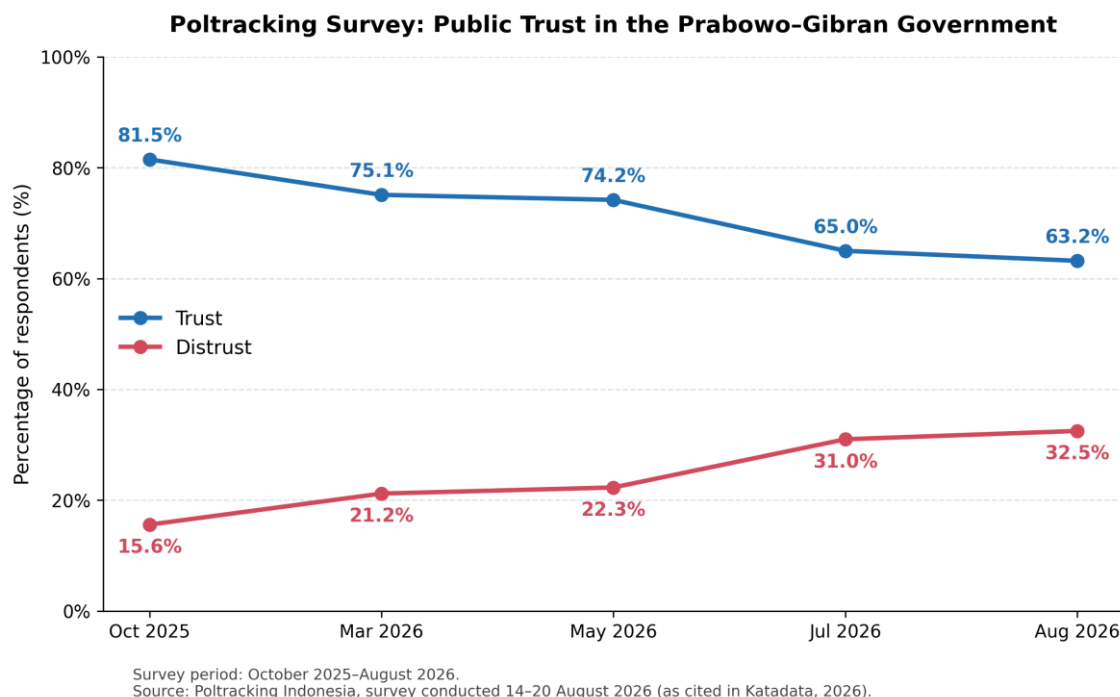


Figure 1. Public Trust in the Prabowo–Gibran Government

Source: Katadata (2026).

In several interview findings, citizens perceived that the social distance between the state and society is increasingly widening due to the weak ethical sensitivity in the exercise of power. Moral considerations, integrity, and social responsibility are perceived as important aspects in the formation of political legitimacy. This is consistent with studies emphasizing the importance of ethical values, public responsibility, and integrity-based leadership as the foundation of democratic legitimacy in the contemporary era (Firdausiyah & Sofa, 2025). Thus, the delegitimization of public institutions is not merely administrative in nature but also moral, reflecting the disruption of the relationship of trust between citizens and the state.

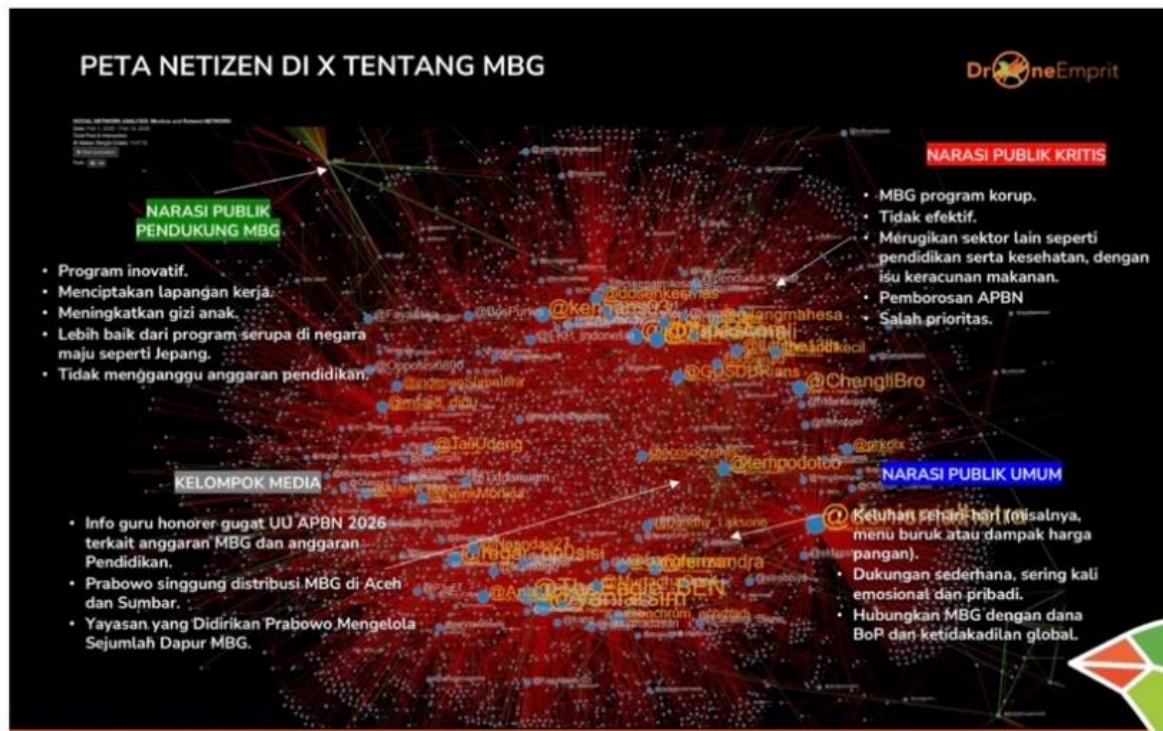
Social Media as an Arena for the Production of Anti-Democratic Discourse

The Prabowo-Gibran Cabinet has positioned the Free Nutritious Meals (Makan Gizi Gratis/MBG) program as a populist program with a total budget of IDR 268 trillion (BGN, go.id, 2026). The main objective of this program is to improve adequate nutritional development for the Indonesian population, particularly children and breastfeeding mothers. This program has naturally attracted public sympathy because it is closely related to economic, health, and social conditions. Massive support through digital media has continued to be mobilized with the expectation that the program will generate broad benefits for society. However, both support for and opposition to the policy have been particularly strong, as reflected in the realities of its implementation since the program was launched. The research data indicate that efforts by supporters of the program continue to be undertaken to ensure its sustainability. This has resulted in an ongoing contestation of narratives aimed at framing diverse forms of public sympathy.

Figure 2 show data by DroneEmprit demonstrate diverse patterns on social media platforms such as X/Twitter. Its analysis identifies four conversations that reveal various forms of discourse. First, the pro-MBG position argues that the program is innovative, creates employment opportunities, improves children's nutrition, and does not interfere with the education budget. Second, the critical or anti-MBG

narrative frames the program as a potential source of corruption for political elites, ineffective in implementation, having implications for education and health programs, constituting a waste of the state budget (APBN), and violating priority scales. Third, there are everyday complaints concerning food menus, the impact on food prices in the market, the relationship between MBG funding and BoP funds, and global inequality.

Figure 2. Netizen Map on X Regarding the Free Nutritious Meals Program (MBG)



Source: DroneEmprit, 2026

Meanwhile, the sentiment analysis concerning the Free Nutritious Meals program, which serves as the basis of the populist program initiated by Prabowo-Gibran, shows relatively diverse findings.

Source: DroneEmprit, 2026

Figure 3 show the various data collected by DroneEmprit from different media platforms reveal a range of both positive and negative sentiments. For instance, various online news outlets show a relatively positive impression, with 76.5% praising the program as an efficient measure for creating household economic stability. Meanwhile, narratives on X/Twitter show a considerably high negative ratio of 89.7%, describing the program as a source of corruption. Other digital media, such as Facebook, display a relatively balanced distribution of public sentiment, with 45.8% positive and 44.9% negative. On the other hand, sentiment on Instagram shows a relatively positive impression, with 68.9% stating that the program is capable of creating employment opportunities in Indonesia.

As a space that provides opportunities for the public to participate in conversations, the intensity of digital interactions explains why polarization, discourse, and sentiment can mobilize broader society around issues that stimulate public reasoning to take action, whether in support of or in criticism of particular policies. Digital media such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X, and YouTube function not only as communication mediums but also play a significant role in shaping discourse and constructing power. Bringing the Free Nutritious Meals program into digital media constitutes one of the government's political communication strategies, presenting its utility as a means of generating positive public sentiment.

Sentiment Analysis of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program Across Media Platforms



Source: DroneEmprit (2026).

Figure 3. Sentiment Analysis of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) Program Across Media Platforms: (a) Online Media, (b) X/Twitter, (c) Facebook, (d) Instagram

However, the program also reveals the complexity of its implementation. While it is capable of generating various positive impacts, it also represents a populist program that was not developed through a sufficiently thorough assessment process. The program has generated critical responses from the public due to a lack of transparency in its management. Furthermore, given its substantial budget, the potential for mismanagement cannot be overlooked. Populist policies may indeed offer an immediate response to public dissatisfaction, but they can also generate significant consequences, particularly when such programs involve substantial budgetary allocations.

Implications for the Quality of Contemporary Democracy

The quality of democracy in Indonesia over the past decade has become a significant challenge to the realization of an ideal democratic system. The collapse of the authoritarian regime under Suharto and

the transition toward the Reform Era did not necessarily guarantee changes in regimes and patterns of power. The past decade has demonstrated how the quality of democracy in Indonesia has never achieved sustained political stability. The Economist Intelligence Unit in 2025 indicated that Indonesia's democracy score reached 6.44 on a scale with a maximum score of 10. This indicates that democracy in Indonesia remains highly fragile, and this fragility is reinforced by various practices of political elites that contribute to its deterioration. Polarization in digital media brings together competing narratives and sentiments between the government and society, further compounded by the strengthening of populist practices constructed through social media to campaign on issues that lack substantive content.

Although digital spaces bring citizens and politicians together and can facilitate the creation of civic dialogue, they also serve as arenas for competing narratives, campaigns, and messages of cynicism. Despite its benefits, social media has also become a tool that can be utilized by political elites to distribute various forms of information. Various political approaches constructed by the government and political elites through populist approaches instead widen the distance between ideal democracy, which is grounded in ideas and substantive principles, and an empty democracy that lacks essence. Consequently, the discourse constructed, both directly and within digital spaces, remains closely associated with issues and programs that are continuously reproduced.

Through a series of policies undertaken by political elites to frame themselves as populist figures, this pattern can be identified through the earlier presence of three central figures who intensely employed populist campaigning: Jokowi, Prabowo Subianto, and Dedi Mulyadi. During his political campaigns, Jokowi presented himself through a *blusukan* style of engagement and as a leader representing ordinary people, accompanied by populist programs such as the Kartu Indonesia Pintar (KIP) and Kartu Indonesia Sehat (KIS) (Warburton, 2016). Although the campaign approach he promoted received strong criticism from the public, Prabowo, on the other hand, emerged as a political elite promoting a nationalist-populist agenda through flagship programs such as the Free Nutritious Meals and Merah Putih Cooperatives. Meanwhile, Dedi Mulyadi emerged as a national political elite who associated himself with the identity of "Bapak Aing" through various pragmatic forms of content rather than developing policies that generate concrete impacts.

The presence of political elites who employ populist rhetoric within political dynamics poses a serious threat to democracy. Not only are their practices of power often far removed from the context of ideal democracy, but their narratives and various programs may also diverge from the continuous and long-term interests of the public. Digital spaces have become exhausting arenas of discursive contestation, with content that is far removed from the process of political education. As a result, the quality of contemporary democracy increasingly operates within the realms of discourse, perception, and relations of trust. Digital populism enables citizens to negotiate their political identities, but at the same time, it reinforces symbolic antagonism toward public institutions. The distrust that emerges is no longer merely situational but develops into structural distrust that influences how citizens perceive the state, the law, and democratic processes. This condition is consistent with the view that unchecked populism has the potential to weaken social cohesion and democratic consensus while creating space for a crisis of political legitimacy (Budiman, 2021).

Nevertheless, digital resistance can also be understood as an expression of citizens' criticism toward inequalities in governance, the absence of social justice, and the weak integrity of state administrators. In other words, digital populism simultaneously reflects the failure of democracy to provide a fair space for representation. These findings emphasize that strengthening democracy cannot rely solely on electoral procedures but requires the strengthening of political ethics, public policy transparency, digital democratic literacy, and the reconstruction of citizens' trust in institutions.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the degradation of the quality of contemporary democracy does not occur solely through changes in institutional structures and procedures, but also through more subtle processes within the realms of discourse, perception, and citizens' relations of trust toward public institutions. Social media populism functions as a space for symbolic resistance that enables citizens to express dissatisfaction, moral criticism, and experiences of alienation toward the state and political elites. Within these digital spaces, collective identities of the people are reproduced through populist narratives, political satire, and symbolic expressions that simultaneously reflect social concerns regarding the legitimacy of democracy.

The research findings also demonstrate that the erosion of public trust is not solely triggered by institutional performance factors but is related to the accumulation of social experiences, inequalities in public policies, and weak ethical sensitivity in the exercise of power. The contestation of narratives carried out by the public in digital spaces through the #IndonesiaGelap campaign formed a symbolic message of citizens' resistance in responding to the government's performance in promoting public welfare. The Free Nutritious Meals program also generated two competing discourses that brought together negative and positive sentiments. The distrust that emerged developed toward structural distrust, namely a form of distrust embedded in citizens' perceptions of the state as a distant, unresponsive, and insufficiently representative entity. At the same time, social media facilitates the reproduction of delegitimizing discourse through echo chamber mechanisms, political discourse polarization, and the circulation of emotional information that narrows the space for democratic deliberation.

Thus, digital populism possesses an ambivalent character. On the one hand, it opens up a space for citizens to express criticism and reveals the state's failure to fulfill the needs for representation, social justice, and public accountability. On the other hand, it has the potential to deepen polarization, reinforce symbolic antagonism toward institutions, and weaken the procedural legitimacy of democracy. This condition emphasizes that strengthening democracy cannot be placed solely on procedural aspects, such as elections or institutional governance, but must also encompass the dimensions of political ethics, digital democratic literacy, and the reconstruction of trust relations between the state and its citizens.

The implications of this study demonstrate the importance of strengthening more inclusive political communication, formulating public policies that are responsive to social aspirations, strengthening mechanisms of moral accountability among state officials, and developing an information literacy ecosystem within digital spaces. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of social contexts and citizen segmentation, as well as to combine qualitative approaches with critical discourse analysis or digital ethnography to enrich the understanding of the dynamics of digital populism and the transformation of public trust in contemporary democracy.

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