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Transactional Political Culture and the Challenges of Public Participation in Indonesian Democracy in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT *This study examines transactional political culture and the challenges of public participation in Indonesia's digital democracy era. The rapid development of information technology and social media has transformed patterns of political communication and public participation, while simultaneously creating new forms of transactional political practices in digital spaces. This study aims to analyze the transformation of transactional political culture in the digital era and its implications for the quality of public participation in Indonesian democracy. The study employed a qualitative approach using library research methods. Data were collected from scientific journals, books, research reports, government documents, and relevant digital media publications. The data were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive-critical analysis techniques to identify patterns of transactional political practices and their influence on digital democratic participation. The findings reveal that transactional political culture remains deeply rooted in Indonesian democracy and has transformed into more complex digital forms through social media, political buzzers, digital propaganda, and information manipulation. Digital political participation tends to become symbolic, emotional, and vulnerable to disinformation and polarization. In addition, social media algorithms and digital communication structures contribute to the strengthening of transactional political networks and elite domination in digital public spaces. The study further finds that strengthening political literacy, digital literacy, and civil society participation is essential for improving the quality of democracy in the digital era. This study contributes to the discourse on digital democracy by offering an integrative perspective on transactional political culture, digital transformation, and public participation in contemporary Indonesian democracy.*

Keywords : Political Culture, Challenges, Public Participation, Indonesian Democracy, Digital Era.

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy is fundamentally built upon the principles of public participation, openness, and citizens' involvement in political decision-making processes (Campos et al., 2026). In the Indonesian context, the post-1998 political reform era has created broader democratic spaces through direct electoral systems (Barras, 2024), freedom of the press, and the expansion of civil society participation within the public sphere. However, the development of democracy has not been fully accompanied by the establishment of a substantive political culture. Transactional political culture remains one of the major problems affecting the quality of Indonesian democracy (Bonita & Wadley, 2022). Transactional politics does not merely occur in the form of *money politics*, but also includes the exchange of interests among political elites, patronage distribution, material-

based voter mobilization, and the use of power for short-term pragmatic interests. This condition indicates that procedural democracy in Indonesia has not yet fully evolved into a participatory democracy oriented toward the public interest (Sajida, 2026).

In its development, the digital era has brought significant changes to patterns of political communication and public participation (Amores et al., 2026). Advances in information technology and social media have created a digital public sphere that enables society to engage more actively in political discourse (Schuessler et al., 2026). Digital platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X, and YouTube (Han et al., 2025) have become new mediums for the dissemination of political information, political campaigns, and the mobilization of public opinion (Islam et al., 2025). On the one hand, digital technology expands public access to political information; (Daoudi et al., 2025) on the other hand, it also creates new challenges in the form of opinion manipulation, disinformation, social polarization, and the commodification of political participation (Ngwenyama et al., 2026). In this context, transactional political culture has transformed from conventional patterns into more complex and systematic digital forms.

The phenomenon of transactional politics in the digital era can be observed through practices such as image-building politics based on social media popularity (Frade, 2026), the use of political *buzzers*, the politicization of social assistance distribution, and the mobilization of support through economic and symbolic incentives (Wahyu Abdul Jafar, 2022). These conditions demonstrate that digital spaces do not always strengthen the quality of democracy; in many cases, they instead become arenas for reproducing pragmatic political practices. Public participation, which should ideally be based on political awareness and democratic rationality, often shifts toward pseudo-participation influenced by economic interests, information manipulation, and group loyalties (Shi et al., 2025). Consequently, the quality of public deliberation within digital democracy becomes increasingly vulnerable to domination by political elites and capitalist interests.

Several previous studies have shown that transactional politics remains a dominant characteristic of Indonesian democracy. Research on *money politics* in elections reveals that patron-client relations and material distribution continue to serve as effective instruments for gaining public political support (Shi et al., 2025). Other studies explain that the development of social media has expanded populist political communication patterns that tend to be emotional and manipulative (Christner et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2023). Nevertheless, most previous studies still focus separately on electoral aspects, *money politics*, or the influence of social media. Studies specifically examining the relationship between transactional political culture and the challenges of public participation within the context of Indonesia's digital democracy remain relatively limited (Saud et al., 2023; Saud & Margono, 2021). In fact, the transformation of digital political spaces has significantly altered interaction patterns among the state, political elites, and society.

Moreover, there is an increasing tendency toward symbolic and non-substantive digital political participation (Zanabazar et al., 2026). Phenomena such as *slacktivism*, the dissemination of unverified information, and trend-based political engagement indicate that public participation in the digital era does not always reflect mature democratic awareness (Madison & Klang, 2020). In such circumstances, society often becomes the object of digital political mobilization rather than a critical subject of democracy. This condition illustrates the paradox of digital democracy in Indonesia: technology opens wider spaces for participation while simultaneously reinforcing transactional and manipulative political practices.

Despite the growing number of studies on transactional politics, public participation, and digital democracy in Indonesia, most existing research still examines these issues separately (Hafel,

2023; Suherlan, 2023). Studies on transactional politics generally focus on *money politics* practices in elections and patron-client relations in local politics (Bakker, 2021), while digital democracy studies mainly emphasize the use of social media as a tool for political communication and mass mobilization. Meanwhile, studies on public participation tend to position society as democratic actors without deeply examining how transactional political culture has transformed within digital spaces and influenced the quality of public participation. Therefore, a significant research gap remains regarding the integrative analysis of the relationship between transactional political culture, digital political transformation, and the challenges of public participation in contemporary Indonesian democracy.

Based on this gap, this study offers novelty through an analytical approach that integrates transactional political culture with the dynamics of digital democracy within a single framework of analysis. This study not only discusses conventional forms of transactional politics but also examines their transformation through social media, digital image politics, the use of political *buzzers*, and technology-based public opinion mobilization. Furthermore, this study positions public participation as a substantive aspect of democracy analyzed within the context of changing political behavior in the digital era. Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a new perspective in the discourse of Indonesian democracy, particularly concerning the challenges of developing a participatory, critical, and integrity-based democracy amid rapid digital technological advancement.

This study aims to analyze transactional political culture and the challenges of public participation in Indonesia's digital democracy, particularly in understanding how the development of information technology and social media influences political relations, the quality of public participation, and the dynamics of substantive democracy in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using library research as the primary research design, focusing on the analysis of transactional political culture and the challenges of public participation in Indonesia's digital democracy era. A qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand socio-political phenomena in depth through the interpretation of various political dynamics, digital communication patterns, and public participation within the context of contemporary democracy. Library research was utilized to examine concepts, theories, and previous studies related to transactional political culture, digital democracy, social media, and public participation.

The data sources in this study consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from various scientific literatures such as reputable national and international journal articles, academic books, research findings, and scholarly documents discussing transactional politics, digital democracy, and public participation in Indonesia. Meanwhile, secondary data were derived from supporting documents such as survey institution reports, government regulations, mass media publications, democracy institution reports, and statistical data related to digital media usage and political participation among Indonesian society.

Data collection was conducted through documentation studies by identifying, classifying, and reviewing various literature sources relevant to the focus of the research. The selected literature was based on thematic relevance, source credibility, publication novelty, and its relation to issues of digital democracy in Indonesia. During the data collection process, the researcher also examined

previous studies to identify research trends, research gaps, and the novelty position developed in this study.

The data were analyzed using content analysis and descriptive-critical analysis techniques. Content analysis was employed to identify patterns, concepts, and forms of transactional political culture developing within digital spaces. Meanwhile, descriptive-critical analysis was used to interpret the relationship between transactional political practices and the challenges of public participation in Indonesia's digital democracy. The stages of analysis included data reduction, thematic categorization, data interpretation, and systematic conclusion drawing to produce a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of digital democracy in Indonesia.

To ensure data validity, this study applied source triangulation techniques by comparing various scientific references, official documents, and relevant previous research findings. In addition, consistency checks and theoretical interpretation reviews were conducted to ensure that the research findings possessed adequate credibility, objectivity, and academic rigor in accordance with the standards of reputable scientific journal writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

1. Transactional Political Culture as an Entrenched Phenomenon

The findings of this study indicate that transactional political culture remains a deeply rooted characteristic within democratic practices in Indonesia. Transactional politics is not only found during electoral moments such as general elections and regional elections, but also develops within power relations among political elites, political parties, and society. Practices involving the exchange of interests in the form of material distribution, politically motivated social assistance, political patronage, and support mobilization based on pragmatic benefits continue to function as major instruments for gaining political legitimacy.

This study found that the persistence of transactional political culture is influenced by several factors, including low levels of political literacy, the strong presence of patron-client culture, economic inequality, and the development of pragmatic political orientations within society. In many cases, society no longer perceives politics as a means of pursuing public interests, but rather as a space for exchanging short-term economic and social benefits. This condition causes political participation to be driven more by pragmatic interests than by substantive democratic awareness.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that transactional political practices have undergone normalization within public political life. Money politics, politically motivated aid distribution, and the provision of certain facilities to specific community groups are often considered normal aspects of democratic processes. This normalization demonstrates that transactional political culture has shaped patterns of political relations that are difficult to separate from contemporary democratic practices in Indonesia.

2. The Transformation of Transactional Culture in Digital Spaces

The development of digital technology and social media has transformed transactional political culture from conventional forms into more complex digital forms. The findings show that social media is not only used as a medium for political communication, but also as an instrument for support mobilization and public opinion formation based on particular interests. Digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X, and YouTube have become strategic spaces for political elites to build political images, influence public perceptions, and expand political influence rapidly and massively.

This study found that the transformation of transactional culture in digital spaces can be observed through the use of political *buzzers*, political influencers, propaganda content, and systematically controlled information distribution. In practice, political support is no longer built solely through direct material distribution, but also through the creation of digital popularity, social media algorithm manipulation, and control over the flow of public information. These conditions indicate that digital technology has expanded the forms of political transactions from material aspects to symbolic and digital dimensions.

Moreover, the study demonstrates that digital spaces have created political competition that is highly dependent on capital power and control over information technology. Political actors with greater economic resources and access to digital networks tend to dominate public opinion formation. Thus, digital democracy does not entirely create equal participatory spaces, but instead has the potential to reinforce power inequality within digital political arenas.

3. The Influence of Transactional Culture on Digital Political Participation

The findings reveal that transactional political culture significantly influences patterns of public political participation in the digital era. Digital political participation tends to shift from substantive participation toward symbolic and pragmatic participation. Society is more frequently involved in temporary, emotional, and trend-based political activities rather than participation oriented toward strengthening substantive democracy.

This study found that social media encourages the emergence of *slacktivism*, a form of political participation limited to symbolic activities such as sharing content, commenting, or following digital campaigns without real involvement in democratic processes. In many cases, such participation is influenced by economic interests, group affiliations, and the popularity of certain political figures. As a result, the quality of public participation becomes vulnerable to information manipulation and politically motivated mobilization based on pragmatic interests.

In addition, the study shows that transactional political culture contributes to the decline of public independence in determining political choices. Information flows controlled by certain groups through digital media significantly influence public thinking patterns and political preferences. Consequently, digital public spaces do not fully function as arenas for democratic deliberation, but are more frequently used as spaces for political influence competition among interest groups.

4. Disinformation, Digital Polarization, and the Reinforcement of Transactional Structures

This study found that the development of transactional political culture in the digital era is closely related to the rise of disinformation and social polarization within digital public spaces. The spread of fake news, political propaganda, information manipulation, and provocative narratives has become a common strategy used to influence public opinion and strengthen particular political support. Such practices not only worsen the quality of political communication, but also reinforce transactional political structures within society.

The findings indicate that social media algorithms contribute to the formation of digital polarization through the strengthening of *echo chambers* and information segregation. People tend to accept information aligned with their political preferences while rejecting opposing information. As a consequence, digital public spaces become increasingly fragmented and vulnerable to socio-political conflicts. In this situation, political elites utilize digital polarization as an instrument for support mobilization and political loyalty reinforcement.

Furthermore, the study found that disinformation within digital spaces is often used as a tool of political transaction to shape public perceptions of candidates, political parties, and certain

policies. The production of manipulative content is conducted systematically through digital networks involving anonymous accounts, political *buzzers*, and propaganda groups. These conditions illustrate that digital democracy faces serious challenges in maintaining the quality of public information and the integrity of democratic processes.

5. Improvement Strategies: Political Literacy and the Strengthening of Civil Society

The findings show that improving the quality of digital democracy requires the systematic strengthening of both political literacy and digital literacy within society. Political literacy is necessary to develop public critical awareness toward transactional political practices, while digital literacy is essential for enhancing people’s ability to filter, verify, and evaluate information circulating within digital spaces.

This study found that strengthening democracy-based political education can become an important strategy for reducing the influence of transactional political culture. Political education should not only focus on procedural democratic understanding, but also on the development of political ethics, participatory awareness, and public social responsibility. In the digital context, media literacy education is also necessary to prevent the spread of disinformation and the manipulation of public opinion.

In addition, the findings highlight the importance of strengthening the roles of civil society, educational institutions, independent media, and digital communities in creating healthy and democratic public spaces. Civil society organizations play a strategic role in conducting social control over transactional political practices and the misuse of digital media in politics. Therefore, strengthening political literacy and civil society participation becomes an essential step toward building a more participatory, critical, and integrity-based digital democracy in Indonesia.

Table 1. Research Findings on Transactional Politics and Digital Democracy

Research Findings	Main Findings	Implications
Transactional Political Culture as an Entrenched Phenomenon	Transactional politics such as <i>money politics</i> , patronage, and pragmatic exchanges are still common in Indonesian democracy.	Public participation is often driven by material interests rather than democratic awareness.
The Transformation of Transactional Culture in Digital Spaces	Social media has changed transactional politics into digital forms through <i>buzzers</i> , influencers, and propaganda content.	Digital politics tends to strengthen elite influence and power inequality.
The Influence of Transactional Culture on Digital Political Participation	Digital political participation is often symbolic, emotional, and trend-based.	Public participation becomes easier to manipulate through digital narratives.
Disinformation, Digital Polarization, and the Reinforcement of Transactional Structures	Fake news, propaganda, and polarized information are widely spread through digital media.	Digital democracy becomes fragmented and vulnerable to political conflict.
Improvement Strategies: Political Literacy and the Strengthening of Civil Society	Political literacy, digital literacy, and stronger civil society are important for improving democracy.	These efforts can encourage more critical and participatory democratic behavior.

Discussion

1. Transactional Political Culture in Indonesian Democracy

The findings of this study demonstrate that transactional political culture remains closely attached to democratic practices in Indonesia. This condition indicates that democratic development in Indonesia still faces structural and cultural challenges. Democracy has formally developed through electoral mechanisms and political openness, yet public political orientation is

often still influenced by pragmatic interests (Johnson-Peretz et al., 2023). In this context, political relations are not fully built upon civic awareness and public responsibility, but rather on reciprocal benefits between political actors and society.

This phenomenon reflects the persistence of patron-client relations within Indonesian political culture. Political support is frequently connected to material incentives and short-term interests, causing democratic participation to become procedural rather than substantive. Such conditions weaken the ideal function of democracy as a system that emphasizes equality, public deliberation, and collective participation (Desierto & Koyama, 2026). Consequently, democratic quality becomes vulnerable to elite domination and political pragmatism.

Furthermore, the normalization of transactional practices illustrates that society has gradually become accustomed to pragmatic political behavior. When transactional politics is repeatedly practiced in elections and public political activities, it becomes socially accepted as a common political pattern. This situation creates difficulties in developing a critical democratic culture based on ethics, accountability, and public interest.

2. The Transformation of Transactional Politics in Digital Spaces

The digital era has significantly transformed the pattern of transactional politics in Indonesia. Political transactions are no longer limited to direct material exchange, but have expanded into digital and symbolic forms through social media platforms. Digital technology allows political actors to shape public perception more effectively through image-building strategies, online campaigns, and algorithm-based communication.

The findings suggest that digital platforms have become strategic tools for constructing political influence. Political actors increasingly rely on digital visibility, online popularity, and media exposure to gain public support. In this situation, political competition shifts from policy-oriented debates toward competition for digital attention and engagement (Pacheco-Ortiz et al., 2026). As a result, political communication becomes more focused on emotional narratives and symbolic representation than on substantive democratic discourse.

In addition, the emergence of political *buzzers*, influencers, and coordinated digital campaigns demonstrates how transactional politics adapts to technological developments. Digital spaces provide opportunities for organized political influence operations that can shape public opinion rapidly and massively. This condition indicates that digital democracy does not automatically strengthen democratic participation, but may also reinforce elite control over information and communication networks.

3. Transactional Culture and Digital Political Participation

The findings also reveal that transactional political culture influences the character of political participation in digital spaces. Although digital media provides broader opportunities for public involvement, participation often tends to be symbolic and reactive. Online political engagement is frequently driven by trends, emotions, and group identity rather than by critical democratic awareness.

This phenomenon can be understood through the growing tendency of superficial digital participation. Social media enables people to engage politically with minimal effort, such as sharing content, commenting, or expressing support online. However, such participation does not always reflect meaningful democratic involvement. In many cases, political engagement becomes temporary and highly dependent on viral issues circulating within digital platforms.

Moreover, digital participation is vulnerable to manipulation because information flows are often controlled by influential political groups (Bayar, 2025). Public opinion can be shaped through

coordinated narratives, emotional campaigns, and selective information distribution. Consequently, digital public spaces may function less as democratic deliberation arenas and more as spaces for political mobilization and influence competition.

4. Disinformation, Polarization, and Transactional Political Structures

The study further shows that disinformation and digital polarization contribute significantly to the strengthening of transactional political structures. The spread of manipulated information through social media creates fragmented public spaces where people are increasingly divided based on political preferences and group identity. Such conditions reduce opportunities for constructive democratic dialogue and encourage confrontational political communication.

Digital polarization is strengthened by social media algorithms that prioritize sensational and emotionally charged content (Mack & Martin, 2024). As users are repeatedly exposed to similar information, they become trapped within *echo chambers* that reinforce existing beliefs and reject alternative perspectives. This mechanism not only intensifies social division but also benefits political actors who rely on polarization to maintain loyalty and mobilize support.

In this context, disinformation becomes a strategic political instrument. Political narratives are intentionally designed to influence public perception, weaken political opponents, and strengthen transactional networks. The organized use of propaganda content, anonymous accounts, and digital campaigns illustrates that information has become a political commodity in the digital era. Therefore, the challenge of digital democracy is not only technological, but also related to the ethics and integrity of political communication.

5. Political Literacy and the Strengthening of Civil Society

The findings emphasize that improving the quality of digital democracy requires stronger political literacy and active civil society participation. Political literacy is essential for developing public critical awareness toward manipulative political practices and transactional political behavior. Citizens with adequate political understanding are more capable of evaluating political information rationally and participating responsibly in democratic processes.

Digital literacy is equally important because the rapid circulation of online information increases the risk of disinformation and public manipulation (Widlak & Peeters, 2025). Society needs the ability to verify information, understand digital communication patterns, and critically respond to political narratives. Without these competencies, democratic participation may easily become vulnerable to propaganda and emotional mobilization.

In addition, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and independent media play strategic roles in strengthening democratic culture. These institutions can function as social control mechanisms against transactional political practices and the misuse of digital media. Through civic education, public advocacy, and democratic awareness campaigns, civil society can encourage the development of a healthier and more participatory democratic environment.

Overall, strengthening democracy in the digital era requires integrated efforts involving political education, ethical digital communication, institutional accountability, and active public participation. Through these approaches, digital democracy in Indonesia can move toward a more critical, participatory, and integrity-based democratic system.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that transactional political culture in Indonesia has undergone transformation along with the development of digital technology, creating new challenges for public participation within the democratic process. The digital era has expanded political

interaction through social media and online communication platforms; however, these developments have also strengthened pragmatic political practices, symbolic participation, and information manipulation within digital public spaces. As a result, public participation in digital democracy is not always directed toward strengthening substantive democratic values, but is often influenced by political interests, digital polarization, and the control of information by dominant political actors. The study also demonstrates that the quality of democracy in the digital era is strongly influenced by society's political and digital literacy capacities. The existence of critical public awareness, ethical political communication, and active civil society participation becomes essential in creating healthier democratic spaces. Therefore, strengthening democracy in Indonesia cannot rely solely on technological advancement and procedural democratic mechanisms, but must also involve the development of democratic political culture, public critical awareness, and institutional accountability. This study contributes to the discourse on digital democracy by providing an integrative perspective on the relationship between transactional political culture, digital transformation, and public participation in contemporary Indonesian democracy. The findings indicate that digital democracy contains both opportunities and risks, depending on how political actors, society, and democratic institutions respond to technological change. For future research, it is recommended to conduct empirical studies focusing on specific digital platforms, generational political behavior, and the role of artificial intelligence in shaping political communication and public opinion. Comparative studies between regions or countries are also important to deepen understanding of how digital political culture develops within different democratic contexts.

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