Article

The manipulation of identity politics in Indonesian electoral democracy today: Between regulations and practices

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Abstract: Electoral contestation in recent Indonesian election periods is faced with the challenge of polarization linked to identity politics, where initially assigned identity is leveraged as tools for political competition. This is a qualitative research, using interviews, observations, and direct group discussion methods to collect data from five different regions in Indonesia. The research focused on the presence of governing regulations and how they develop in complex dynamics. The results showed that identity politics was prevalent in all regions due to mobilization through identity manipulation to gain electoral political advantage. Furthermore, electoral characteristics showed a growing tendency toward polarization, primarily in terms of religion and ethnicity, with some issues related to regionalism, gender, religious affiliations, and family history networks. It was also found that weak regulations on identity manipulation led to increasing permissiveness among political actors, the state, and voters. This made identity issues become natural electoral problems, despite weakening the developing democracy in Indonesia. In this context, future contests in Indonesia are expected to consistently intensify identity politics, with the lack of regulations, permissiveness, and social media serving as the main driving factors.

Keywords: identity politics; electoral contestation; regulations; religion; ethnicity

1. Introduction

The 2024 General Election is set to mark a significant milestone in Indonesian electoral history. For the first time, elections of national-level legislative members, provincial, district, and city-level legislatures, senators representing regions, president and vice-president, as well as regional heads will be held simultaneously. Five of these elections will be consolidated in five ballot paper packages at the voting booth, with the sixth held at the end of the same year.

The simultaneous election presents the most complex electoral moment in the history of independent Indonesia since 1945. This is a direct result of streamlining the General and Regional Head Elections for the 278.6 million Indonesian population (BPS, 2023), into 204.8 million voters. This complexity is not only about conducting elections in the largest Muslim country in the world but also about maintaining national cohesion within the context of regional autonomy and decentralization which tend to fluctuate.

Throughout its electoral history, Indonesia has experienced division in political power during every election, often leading to disintegration. Identity divisions were primarily characterized by organizational ideology after independence but marked by forced assimilation imposed by the government regime during the New Order period from 1966 to 1998. In the reform period from 1998 until today, electoral contests have

been intrinsically related with identity reconstruction. This includes efforts in the name of regional autonomy, as well as the struggles of marginalized groups, leading to ethnic, community, and religious revivalism.

In the last two General Elections, which included Regional Head Elections, Indonesian electoral politics have demonstrated how easily power dynamics can be manipulated using identity as a foundation. Since the Presidential Election in 2014, followed by the 2017 Governor Election in the capital city and the 2019 Presidential Election, Indonesian voters have witnessed a prolonged struggle where identity is exploited for electoral gain. The use of identity, which was previously more elegant and ideologically nuanced, has recently became brutal with the manipulation of identity as a political tool for winning. However, identity manipulation in elections is inevitable despite the procedural improvement in the conduct of General Elections by the Election Commission and the Supervisory Agency. Legal regulations are not adequate to counteract identity politics. Romli (2019) stated that identity politics divided society and posed a threat to the sustainability of democracy (Lesmana and Sutrisno, 2021; Kambo and Yani, 2021). Warburton (2020) stated that polarization in elections reduced the quality of democracy, although according to Lane (2023), it was more rhetorical among political elites than reality.

The current research aimed to investigate the functioning of identity politics within the context of electoral democracy in Indonesia. This was carried out by examining the theoretical understanding and contextualization of identity politics in Indonesia. The primary objective was to explore proposed legal frameworks governing identity politics and the practical application in electoral contests across several key regions. Subsequently, the potential outcomes of simultaneous elections in Indonesia were investigated by outlining the possibilities of how manipulation could be replicated. This research fundamentally stated that identity continues to be used and has the potential to be increasingly employed as a tool for manipulating political competition.

2. Materials and methods

This research adopted a qualitative method, which constitutes the effort to uncover insights by gathering in-depth data through various means such as interviews, observations, and literature studies. This research initially included an examination of regulations regarding identity politics within existing legislation in Indonesia. The data were classified and further explored through field investigations. In the field depth, data were obtained through face-to-face, open-ended, in-depth interviews, and subsequently analyzed using the focus group discussion model, with all participants serving as informants. Furthermore, purposive sampling was used for informant selection based on specific criteria. The criteria set included representation from political party officials, legislative members, Election Commission commissioners, Election Supervisory Agency commissioners, academics, village-level government officials, religious figures, organization activists, and democracy advocates in each research location. The total informants obtained were 76 individuals, evenly distributed across genders, representing various religions and ethnicities, as well as spanning different age groups. Moreover, all informants understood the openness of

the data provided and consented to being included in the research report. Observations were conducted at the research locations by observing and comparing campaign atmospheres, as well as how identity groupings developed in the daily lives of the community.

The selected research locations were as follows: Bangka Belitung Islands Province, representing the island provinces in Western Indonesia with a Malay-Chinese influence and predominantly Islamic religion, West Kalimantan Province, representing Kalimantan Island with a mixture of Dayak-Malay ethnicities and a blend of Islam and Christianity, Maluku Province, located in Eastern Indonesia with an equal division between Islam and Christianity, East Nusa Tenggara Province, located on the border region with variations of Catholics, Christians, and a minority of Islamic faiths, and South Sulawesi Province, representing the central part of Indonesia with a Bugis ethnic influence and predominantly Islamic religion. These areas were selected with the consideration for Indonesian regional divisions into East, Central, and West. This research was conducted throughout 2023.

The data analysis was conducted through data classification, where significant and relevant parts were selected, followed by triangulation. The triangulation included cross-checking data across provinces, and informant triangulation, which included cross-checking interview results in the field. Furthermore, the data were abstracted and presented to draw conclusions in line with the main research objectives.

3. Results

3.1. De-ideologization: understanding the context of identity politics in Indonesia

How can identity politics be truly comprehended? What actions and behaviors does identity entail? And where does identity politics genuinely find its place? According to Kenny (2004), identity politics fundamentally refers to the process of transforming group behavior through various political arguments. In practice, it serves as a tool for pursuing political interests, a concept referred to as manipulation by Twikromo (2009). Bagir (2011) added that identity is a basis for asserting and exploiting claims. Bloomfield et al. (2000) also identified it as a veneer for issues primarily related to the distribution of resources.

This research posited that the use of identity politics was primarily within electoral context. It also contended identity politics as a tool for advancing specific interests, used, adopted, constructed, and established solely to gain political advantage for adherents. Throughout its evolution, identity politics is regarded as electoral tool, primarily used for the pursuit of power rather than class struggle, and a basis for claiming electoral contests. The preceding idea has remained the reality, despite the various definitions of identity politics by different figures over time.

According to Gaffar (1929) and Feith and Lance (1998), political landscape was more correlated with major ideological factors such as Nationalist, Islamic, Communist, and Christian during the early years of Indonesian independence (Feith, 1971). Electoral contests fostered the strengthening of ideological and sectarian groups through more egalitarian avenues. There was still ideological polarization despite the

narrowing down of group during the New Order era, which differed from the elections after the reform period in 1998. The 1999 elections witnessed various participating parties, some with ideological and identity nuances, as well as coalitions of diverse interests. The **Table 1** shows the basis of identity of political parties in Indonesia from election to election.

Table 1. Election participants and their basis.

Election period	Election participants	Religion based	Ethnic based	Region based	General
1955	118	7	3	8	100
1971	10	6	-	-	4
1977–1997	3	1	-	-	2
1999	44	19	-	-	25
2004	24	7	-	-	17
2009	44	8	-	6	30
2014	15	5	-	3	7
2019	20	5	-	4	11
2024	24	6	-	6	12

Source: Processed from various sources.

Political parties and electoral contests have assumed a less ideological role since the reform era, with contestants and party platforms losing their distinctiveness. This is because political coalitions have become more fluid and easily formed based on calculated pros and cons, specifically when determining presidential and vice-presidential tickets, as well as regional leaders and deputies. The phenomenon of party-switching among political party members has become a noticeable trend during the periodic registration of political parties with electoral authorities before elections.

Historically, elections in Indonesia have always been characterized by identity politics, based on religious, ethnic, and regional identity. Meanwhile, there is a reduction in the number of identity-based parties, the mobilization of identity issues has continued to grow. Warburton (2020) observed a decreasing ideological competition since the reform era, partly due to the inclusiveness of campaign models and the collaborative efforts of politics actors in gaining access to government and patronage resources. This has led to a compromise in the ideological dimension and the legitimacy of democracy (Fossati, 2023), particularly through inclusive coalitions (Aspinall, 2019). The research by Harteveld and Wagner (2022) showed polarization was effective in attracting voters to the polls, but it was the affective polarization that tended to be more dominant than ideology-based polarization. According to Harteveld and Wagner (2022), partisanship in elections tended to become negative, specifically towards political party ideologies.

According to Fossati (2019), Indonesian democracy tends to be flawed due to the difficulty in result of political structure that offers strong and opposing policy alternatives. The relationship between citizens and politicians is primarily built on patronage and clientelism logic, resulting in many political choices not being clearly articulated to determine voters' political preferences. Moreover, the political Islam, once envisioned as an ideological force, has not provided a clear and distinct platform.

Hamayotsu (2011) speculated that Islamic-based parties had made changes and adjustments to their ideological positions to appeal to Indonesian voters, while consistently exploiting religious ideas, symbols, networks, and resources.

The General Election, followed immediately by the direct Regional Head Election, witnessed the mobilization of various identity features (Nordholt, 2008) and the crossbreeding of ideologies due to the divergence of political party members. In the last four elections, the dominant political theme has been the mobilization of identity, whether religious, ethnic, or regional. Electoral contestation quickly transformed into politics of confrontation, primordial politics, and other identity narratives. In modern Indonesian elections, forms of primordialism pose a real threat to national integration and tend to become the primary tool in elections. Candidates and supporters do not hesitate to create divisive narratives and form coalitions in subsequent elections. The game of identity politics has indeed divided societal groups, some of which can be reconciled after the election, while others become lasting divisions among the electorate.

Elections in contemporary Indonesia appear to be less concerned with issues related to programs, promises for the future, or proposed changes (Muhtadi, 2023), instead identity politics tends to increase (Herdiansyah, 2017; Ardipandanto, 2020; Kartini, 2021; Darmawan, 2021; Widyawati, 2021). Jati (2022) stated that polarization in Indonesia is currently characterized by identity rather than ideology. Importantly, ideology has become intertwined with identity politics, particularly when elected leaders can harness identity for the mobilization of followers. Voters are more inclined to identify with identity over the pursuit of fair elections. Politicians tend to rely on identity politics to garner support (Pandito, 2023), a trend that has persisted since the 2017 Jakarta Governor Election. This has given rise to the term 'identity entrepreneurs', who mobilize the masses for political interests in the name of religion (Prasetyawan, 2018; Djuyandi and Ramadhani, 2019). The identity entrepreneur is associated with individual or group behavior that consistently sells identity as a material in promoting or rejecting certain individuals in electoral events.

Identity politicization had taken various forms in General and Regional Head Elections, expanding from one period to another. Many campaign strategies currently promote narratives of similarities and differences among voters. These campaigns, which should revolve around political ideas, are increasingly focused on reinforcing a shared identity among voters while simultaneously identifying differences. This inconsistent use of identity ranges from the need to affirm similarities among homogeneous voters to the efforts to negate different groups. Such narratives of similarities and differences are often overtly and prominently displayed on various campaign platforms.

Practice of constructing similarities and differences is not confined to formal campaign environments, but also prevalent in informal settings, internal meetings, specific community activities, and even concealed within various campaign agendas. Forming these narratives in identity has been the most easily ignitable raw material and a mobilization tool to build political support.

The most frequently politicized identity revolve around religion and ethnicity, with a smaller portion concerning regional origin, gender, religious affiliations, and family network history. Meanwhile, religion and ethnicity are central issues in various

democratic events, religion has particularly played a dominant role. According to Aspinall and Mietzer (2019), the recent Indonesian Election showed a trend of promoting religious-based polarization during the campaign. Religious groupings play a key role amid religious heterogeneity and discussions about majority-minority issues. In Indonesia, a country with five officially recognized religions and one belief system, where Islam holds the most dominant position, religious mobilization has been relatively successful, particularly in relation to long-standing debates about tolerance, faith, and the spread of religious promotion also known as dakwah in Islam. The issue of religion becomes more complex as regional religious groupings are not evenly distributed. The long history of integration and pluralism has also contributed immensely. However, what historically unites Indonesia appears to have been strained by politicization of electoral contestation.

Ethnicity has become a central point of contention during various campaign moments, in addition to religious concerns. With a diversity of 1,331 ethnic and sub-ethnic groups (BPS, 2015), political figures cannot escape the influence of identity politicization. Javanese and Non-Javanese hold the most intense debate, even though more than 50% of Indonesian population belongs to the Javanese ethnicity, with a significant portion residing on Java Island. However, the distribution of diverse ethnic backgrounds has long been a significant element in the discourse of ethnicity during general elections. Electing a President, Vice President, representatives, or even local leaders is not without a shadow of ethnic identity. Ethnicity in politics has, at times, served as a tool for affirmation and differentiation, easily mobilized for electoral purposes. This was elaborated by Aspinall (2011), stating that ethnic politics in Indonesia is not about ethnicization or aimed at strengthening ethnic identity, but primarily for electoral interests.

Gender plays a significant role in political considerations within Indonesian patrilineal culture, specifically as an object of political discrimination, particularly in relation to a woman's electability. Indonesian political culture is synonymous with masculinity, which is intertwined with religious issues. In Islam, leadership is traditionally related to men, while women typically assume the role of followers, creating a dual bias of gender and religion in identity. In various electoral experiences, including legislative ones, women issues are frequently used to discredit specific candidates (Rahmaniah, 2018; Dewi, 2015). Since gender motif is practically no less substantial than the competition per se, gender identity often becomes a significant concern in the name of religion.

The issues regarding authenticity, the place of origin or regionality is discussed in terms of birth and ancestry, debates often devoid of ideas. Politics of regional origin, while not inherently significant, are often debated to assess fitness for leadership. For example, Ahok, the former Governor of Jakarta, was often perceived as ineligible for the presidency or vice presidency as Chinese descent. Anis Baswedan, one of the presidential candidates competing in the 2024 elections, has faced rumors of being of Arab descent from Yemen rather than an original Indonesian. Various regional head elections have also witnessed major issues, which may not be essential but consistently present.

Identity ideas that often develop and become part of issue mobilization include religious affiliation and family history. Religious affiliation can be related to issues in

particular religious sect, such as within Islam, between Nadhatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. Sectarian politics initially occurred during the early days of Indonesian independence and the 1955 elections. In recent practice, issues related to religious sect orientation have gained importance after the primary role of religion in the broader and general sense.

Another sensitive identity issue is family network history, particularly when ethnicity is a focal point. This pertains to the family one belongs to and identity held. For instance, Ahok is often perceived as Chinese (Pertiwi, 2021), of Hakka descent and Catholic, and Anis Baswedan is seen as Middle Eastern descent, not Arab but Yemeni, despite being a descendant of Indonesian national hero, Rasyid Baswedan. Jokowi is also regarded as part of the Javanese people whose father is assumed to be affiliated with Indonesian Communist Party organization in the past (Panuju, 2018).

The most pronounced identity politics, specifically related to religion and ethnicity, was observed respectively in the 2014 General, 2017 Jakarta Regional Head, and 2019 General Elections. Below is an illustration regarding the escalation of identity politics:
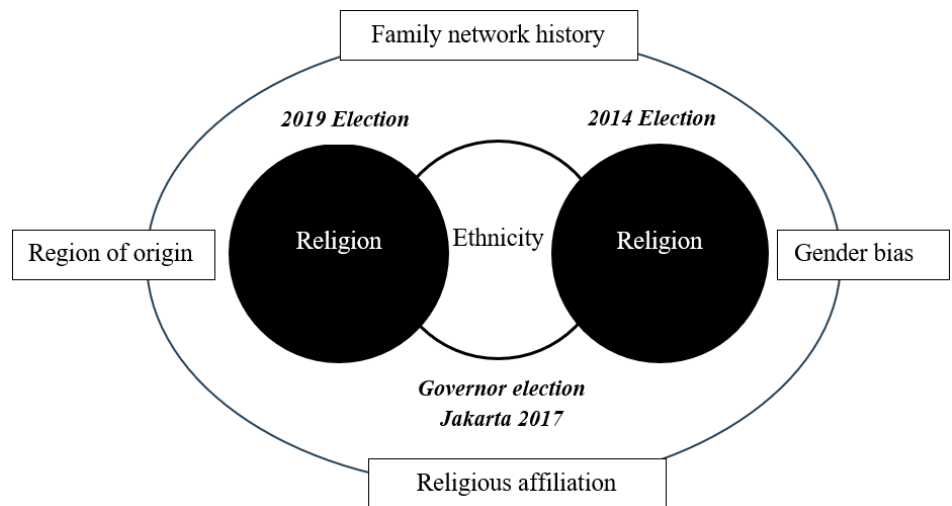

Figure 1. Identity politics issues in the last three elections.

The **Figure 1** above explains the dynamics of identity politics in the last 3 dramatic elections, with emphasis on religious and ethnic aspects as two important issues. Regional origin, gender, religious affiliation, and family network history represent additional mobilization factors. The context of identity mobilization is generally pervasive across all levels of elections, including local, national, legislative, and executive. This demonstrates that identity mobilization has been established as a means of struggle continually contested, negated, and affirmed.

Variations in identity politics is experiencing massive expansion. Recent support from mass and social media has led to an increasingly uncontrolled proliferation. Writings from various parties can easily appear on public social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and Instagram, where they are immediately readable before being sorted according to the respective orientations and interests. The ease of obtaining press freedom since the onset of the reformation in 1998 has facilitated the emergence of numerous online media outlets. Since the reform movement started in

1998, replacing the New Order regime led by President Soeharto, there has been a significant change in press freedom. However, the unchecked growth of online media has also made it a perfect tool for identity politics mobilization. Mass media, which have become more liberal after the New Order authoritarian regime, tend to engage with investors, leading television, radio, newspapers, and online media to be easily co-opted for disseminating pro-identity partisan news.

The selection of identity has become remarkably easy, tailored to individual interests. The mobilization of issues no longer relies on conventional face-to-face campaigns but also incorporates visual aids, mass media, and social platforms. Moreover, identity is chosen, constructed, affirmed, negated, and alternately used for the sake of winning. The following key question was raised regarding the role of electoral regulations in Indonesia: Will they be left unchanged, or is there a need for significant adjustments?

3.2. The regulatory crisis and efforts to enforce wet threads

There are at least two laws that regulate the conduct of General Elections and Regional Head Elections in Indonesia, namely Law Number 7 of 2017 for General Elections and Law Number 1 of 2014, as amended by Law Number 1 of 2015 and further amended by Law Number 10 of 2016. These laws govern two different levels of elections, which, for the first time, will be held concurrently, although in different months of the year 2024. There are no specific rules governing how identity will be managed in the election, showing that the use of identity has not been considered a significant matter in electoral context.

Out of the 573 articles in Law Number 7 of 2017, only one addresses the prohibition of discussing matters related to ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group relations, commonly referred to as 'SARA' (Suku et al., 2015) This is specified in article 280, paragraph 1, letter c. Meanwhile, the letter below somewhat relates to the prohibition of inciting or sowing discord among individuals or the community. These provisions are considered clear in the explanatory section of the law.

A similar principle is mentioned in the Law regulating Regional Head Elections. In Article 69 of Law Number 1 of 2015, letter b states that it is prohibited to insult someone, their religion, ethnicity, race, and inter-group relations, both for candidates and political parties, during the campaign. It is also mentioned under letter c that it is forbidden to incite, slander, and sow discord among political parties, individuals, or community groups. In the explanatory annex of the law, letter b is described as clear, while letter c introduces the term 'negative campaigning to refer' to this provision.

Under the derivative regulations, the General Election Commission issues regulations that serve as references for each election period. The most recent ones, in preparation for the 2024 General Election, are General Election Commission Regulation Number 15 of 2023, in conjunction with Number 20 of 2023. Article 23 specifies provisions regarding the campaign to respect ethnic, religious, racial, and inter-group differences in society. Similar provisions are mentioned in Article 72, specifically paragraph 1, letter c.

Regulations regarding politicization of identity are very limited in electoral regulations specifically governing elections. This has raised the question of whether

limited regulations show the absence of identity politicization in every election or, conversely, the lack of importance attributed to identity politicization. In reality, identity politics in its various forms permeate many aspects of elections. Even though the provisions state that identity politicization is considered a criminal act, its enforcement is questionable. Moreover, Election Supervisory Agency has already identified identity politicization as a vulnerability in the electoral process.

Considering higher-level regulations, there is an amended 1945 Constitution to govern the fundamental principles of unity in diversity, serving as a state ideology. Chapter XA contains provisions regarding human rights to recognition, guarantees, protection, equal treatment under the law, embrace specific religion and beliefs, and freedom from discriminatory treatment on any grounds. This Constitution has been a foundational consensus for shaping an independent Indonesia since 1945.

In derivative regulations, there is Law Number 40 of 2008 concerning the elimination of discrimination based on race and ethnicity. Regulations state that penalties will be imposed on individuals who engage in discrimination, exceptions, restrictions, or selections, as well as on actions demonstrating hatred or animosity toward others due to racial and ethnic differences.

Another derivative regulation, namely Law Number 11 of 2008, as amended by Law Number 19 of 2016, on Information and Electronic Transactions, Article 28 regulates the prohibition of intentionally and without authorization disseminating information aimed at inciting hatred or enmity toward individuals or certain community groups based on ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group relations.

In Law Number 1 of 2023 on the Criminal Code, Article 242 regulates that it is prohibited to express feelings of hostility, hatred, or insult toward one or more groups or communities based on race, nationality, ethnicity, skin color, gender, and disability groups, actions covered by Article 244. Meanwhile, provisions related to acts of hostility, expressions of hatred, and incitement based on religion and belief are regulated in Article 300.

The following scheme shows the existence of regulations related to the role of identity issues:
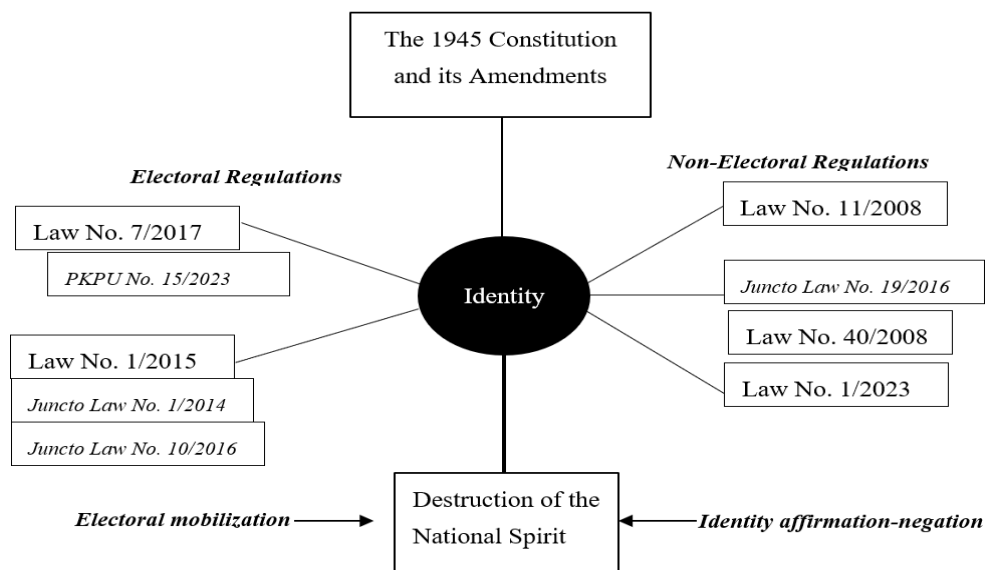

Figure 2. Regulations concerning identity.

Based on the **Figure 2**, there are only two main regulations as bases for prohibiting identity manipulation in electoral activities, while the rest are governed by non-electoral provisions. This situation suggests that electoral contests do not prioritize identity issues and the mobilization of identity as a significant matter. Besides being regulated by limited articles in electoral provisions, the use of identity is also not considered highly operational. In many cases, identity politicization tends to be left unchecked and treated as a common part of public discourse, even though there is a potential for the erosion of national values that continues to persist. According to Romli (2019), neglecting identity mobilization for electoral purposes contributes to the potential for division within society, and poses a serious threat to the future of democracy (Lesmana and Sutrisno, 2021; Kambo and Yani, 2021).

Efforts to eliminate identity politicization in every electoral contest can be akin to trying to hold water with hands. As, one of electoral organizers, revealed several allegations of violations that actually mobilize identity. However, these allegations cannot be executed as regulations are highly general. Ep, a former Chair of Election Supervision in East Belitung District, stated that despite allegations, the rules are open to interpretation because identity often carries double-meaning, namely a tool for attacking and a means of defending self-image.

Zul, a former leader of the election supervisory body, mentioned that one of the difficulties lies in the different interpretations of each law enforcement officer: 'We have a center for law enforcement in election administration, which consists of various agencies, but when they come together, we often have different opinions, and in the end, it is decided not to be a violation'. Ida, another former leader of the election supervisory body at a different level, shared a similar sentiment of how a case with religious undertones was reported and progressed during a campaign period. However, when the case reached the court, the legal authorities changed the charge from the initial religious issues to disrupting campaign activities. This is because religious issues are sensitive and risky when charged under that particular law.

Edo, a journalist in West Kalimantan, stated that these issues may remain unprohibited as long as they are not regulated, as is the case with politicization of identity in electoral contestation. Edo further mentioned that there can be no action without rules. Alb, one of the party administrators at that time, showed that political party leaders tended to be permissive and unbothered about the persistent use of identity politics.

Weak regulations may be a fundamental reason identity politicization or destructive identity mobilization hardly ever undergoes enforcement. It is also likely that almost all parties are operating within a weak legal system, hence, these issues tend to be ignored in electoral contests. The mix of regulations between electoral and non-electoral aspects is not sufficient to guide electoral contests toward a greater focus on vision, mission, and the dissemination of information about work program plans.

4. Discussion

The influence of identity politics is becoming increasingly apparent as Indonesia prepares for its first simultaneous elections, including the Presidential election, the People Consultative Assembly at the national level, the Regional Representative

Council, and the Provincial and District/City Legislative Councils. The emergence of identity-based narratives on various social media platforms shows that identity politics may not only surface but also become more pronounced. Some of the narratives include *Indonesia Asli* vs. *Turunan Arab* and *Orang Jawa* vs. *Wan Abud*, representing the stigmatization of presidential candidates, *Pro Asing* (China) vs. *Pro Timur Tengah*, *Antek China*, *Partai Kafir*, *Afiliasi Nadhatul Ulama*, and several other primordial labels. Soderborg and Muhtadi (2021) stated that polarization based on religion, ethnicity, and regionalism would persist as long as politicians continue to exploit these issues. According to Warburton (2020), the most evident polarization occurred during the 2019 General, 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial, and 2019 General Elections, primarily due to manipulation of religious and ethnic sentiments by political figures to attract voters.

Various social media platforms have become the primary means of disseminating information related to identity politics, often targeting specific political figures. Facebook and Instagram stand out as two widely used platforms for disseminating information related to identity politics, whether for the purpose of attacking or defaming a person. WhatsApp, a relatively closed medium, is effectively used for sharing various news, information, chain messages, albeit with very weak accuracy. Dharma et al. (2023) found that platforms like Instagram have become effective tools for political buzzers to create religious, group, and ethnic-based political polarization. The term 'political buzzers', which has recently gained popularity, refers to individuals who act as attackers on a particular issue during a campaign, whether attacking opponents or aiming to promote a party. Rif, one of the informants in the Focus Group Discussion held in Pontianak City, elaborated that social media had become a wide space for narrating identity politics. RIF also expressed concerns about the lack of strong filters on social media to ensure identity neutrality.

The Election Supervisory Agency, according to Bre et al. (2023) team, introduced an election vulnerability index by placing emphasis on the issues regarding politicization of Ethnicity, Race, Groups, and the use of social media. However, some of the recommendations are still largely qualitative and preventive, rather than operational from a regulatory perspective. Ely, an academic from Pontianak, West Kalimantan, pointed out that identity is essentially politicized for electoral interests but is not explicitly considered a violation, making its mobilization difficult to prosecute.

Amid the instability of Indonesian society regarding identity mobilization, identity politics based on sectarian divisions, prominent during the Old Order of Indonesian independence (1945–1965) and during the 32-year rule of President Soeharto's New Order regime (1966–1998) periods, tend to be very biased. Meanwhile, identity politics has adhered to the background content of certain religious beliefs, with sub-religions forming differentiators in the past, sectarian politics does not seem to hold the same sway currently. Debates regarding religious affiliation are not as prevalent, with the exception of some grouping support from Nahdatul Ulama circles, which are generally based in East Java Province. Similarly, ideologically based politics, including debates regarding political parties and the ideologies promoted, are not pertinent in the quest for political support. The 2024 election is likely to move further away from the notion of identity politics based on certain sects and ideologies.

Political party coalition calculations are primarily influenced by electoral thresholds calculations, rather than ideological platforms. However, the challenge is that the idea of identity politics, in more primordial sense, is established after coalitions.

Political ideas based on vision and mission do not appear to occupy a central place in the minds of Indonesian voters in the 2024 simultaneous elections. The focus is likely to remain on identity mobilization and grouping based on primordialism. Identity manipulation by political elites and support groups is expected to overshadow the ideas of the candidates. This is in line with the expectations of Jon, an informant from the activist element of a Civil Society Organization, who claims that identity politics can be increasingly risky when exploited by interested actors. Asa, another informant, referred to identity politicization as a merchandise or a tool for political transactions, which Her attributed the cheap political cost of mobilization.

Amid these conditions, voters seem to be increasingly permissive in identity manipulation for political purposes. Cor, a village head from Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara Province, stated that elections in Kupang have always revolved around religious issues, followed by ethnicity.

Lau, another informant from the academic sphere, mentioned that General and Regional Elections in Kupang often conclude with religion as the central criterion for voting. As part of a broader issue of identity, religious issues are primary to ethnicity in the context of election. Sub-ethnicity issues are often less prominent with regional groupings of origin but become relevant when considering Catholic and Christian origins. Fri, a young activist in the religious sector, stated that ethnicity is more often used as a point of contention, since religious issues are resolved at the main consideration level.

According to Ben, an activist in Ambon, Maluku, religion remains the primary identity considered in the political calculations, with new social identity, such as economic classes, being prominent. Nad expressed a similar sentiment, stating that identity is often used as a bargaining tool in Maluku. However, a challenge arises as identity is frequently used inconsistently by those promoting identity issues when lobbying and campaigning during elections. Jan mentioned that this instrumentalization appears inconsistent and tailored to immediate interests. Religious identity is often used as a tool to reject followers of different religions during campaigns and to formulate political calculations. Furthermore, it is often used as a means to reinforce internal communal solidarity in certain identities. This leads to identity being used inconsistently because the basis corresponds with campaign needs.

There is an apparent trend of voters becoming more permissive with mobilized identity issues. Dan, one of the church congregation leaders, stated that the use of identity is a natural occurrence, because democracy is perceived as a tool for upward mobility of certain individuals. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of religion in consolidating support is proven, the public could eventually acknowledge the need for welfare. Sen, from Ambon, believes that religion is actually a tool for political stabilization, in the context where religious considerations are essential in determining political outcomes. Furthermore, factors such as religion, ethnicity, and regional origin play crucial roles in shaping political calculations, in line with Kambo (2018), which identified the importance of identity-based calculations.

Kris, one of the professional success teams in Kupang, explained that while identity is an important tool in mobilizing support, emphasis on religion remains strong, specifically when thickening identity narratives persist. Ely conveyed a similar idea in the experience of regional head elections in West Kalimantan that coalition calculations between Dayak-Malay and Islam-Christian-Catholic were the determining factor in winning a contest.

Patronage and clientelism have become essential binding mechanisms amid these conditions. According to Est, clientelism is another contributing factor after religion and ethnicity, and a tool of a new social class for primordialism issues. This observation is consistent with Aspinall (2011), stating that patronage and clientelism play a central role in integrating political allegiance, loyalty, and organization, fostering high levels of pragmatism, flexibility, and opportunism in Indonesian politics.

Permissiveness regarding identity use in every electoral celebration is exacerbated by the lack of explicit regulations governing this matter. According to Han, an election organizer, there are no prohibitions on the use of identity politics in elections. The most recent regulations, General Election Commission Regulation Number 15 of 2023 in conjunction with Number 20 of 2023, does not address this prohibition, instead elections are essentially legalized conflicts. Jef explained that while identity politics exists, their responsibility is to provide education, as the supervision is carried out by election monitoring institutions.

The upcoming General and Regional Head Elections in Indonesia have consistently featured identity issues, predominantly based on primordialism. This trend is amplified by the growing influence of mass media and social platforms as tools for disseminating information. Concurrently, society is increasingly permissive about identity issues, which are viewed not only as a campaign asset but also an intrinsic basis for electoral calculations. The absence of comprehensive regulations has facilitated the persistence of identity politics. Although, Macdonald (2013) stated that electoral system in Indonesia, since the reform era successfully promoted figure-based elections and diminished ethnic or religious intersection factors, identity-related issues remained unresolved. This was because these issues were inconsistently exploited by politicians to target specific identity groups. Identity has therefore become an entry point for electoral mobilization, devoid of ideological significance, and primarily serving the competitive interests of political figures.

Below is an overview of the projected role of identity in Indonesian electoral democracy, both presently and in the future.

This scheme explains that primordial-based identity is generally highly effective as mobilization tools in regional and head elections. Issues of primordial identity such as religion, ethnicity, and region of origin have been extensively capitalized upon, followed by sub-primordial identity like sub-religious composition, sub-ethnicity, and regionality. Moreover, the mobilization of identity based on social class, whether historical or economic, has gained prominence. Campaigns with identity mobilization, mostly transmitted through informal campaign spaces, have proven to be highly effective. In recent years, social media has further facilitated the dissemination of Identity-related information. Consequently, General and Regional Head Elections have become more permissive regarding identity politics. This trend is sustained by

the inherent cycle of identity mobilization in every electoral contest and the absence of comprehensive regulations that foster the growing prevalence of identity politics.
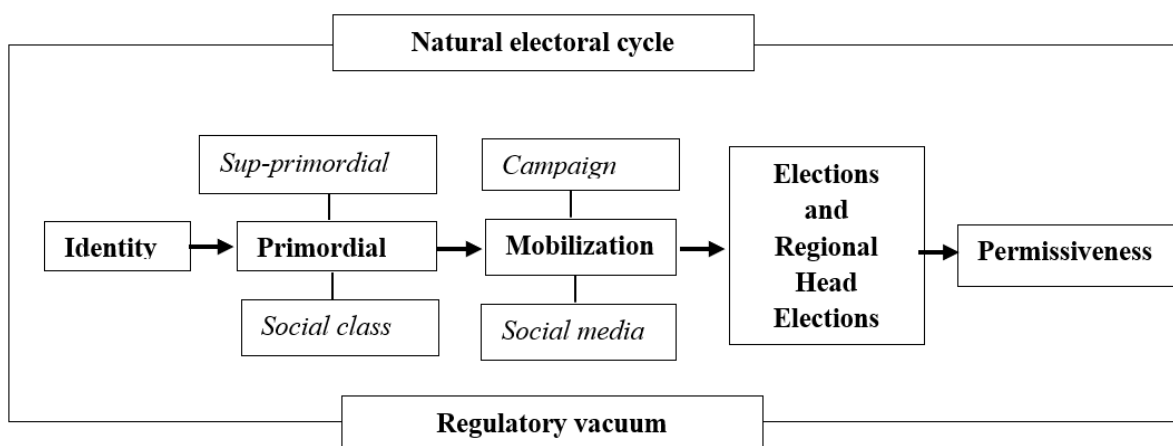

Figure 3. Prediction of identity politics positions in the next election.

Identity capitalization in electoral contests is more tolerable when rooted in issues of equality or class struggle as shown by **Figure 3**. Kreiss et al. (2020), which introduced the concept of identity ownership, explained that contestants mostly support their target group, demonstrating a process of prototyping politics. In this context, identity politics is dynamically driven not only by information but also by the intrinsic value of identity. Hadiz and Robison (2017) stated that the rise of populism in Indonesia has not been transformative, but oligarchic, with predatory groups adapting to the demands of election competition to maintain influence (Hadiz, 2018). The intriguing and essential question is whether identity politics in electoral spaces are propelled by the values of identity struggle or merely limited to the distribution of information for victory purposes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the transitioning of Indonesia, a large democratic country amid periodic electoral contestation, from the Old to the New Reform Order, had witnessed strong political ideologies, fragmented into creative, nationalist, and religious groups. However, since the reformation began in 1998, political contests have increasingly centered around the fragmentation of primordial-based identity.

Over the past decade, and in the upcoming simultaneous elections in 2024 and beyond, identity politicization has gained significance as the main axis of contention. The instrumentation of identity with its massive mobilization during the campaign period was not balanced by strong regulations, hence voters and contestants tended to be permissive toward identity narratives. Failure to anticipate the potential consequences of identity mobilization in elections could disintegrate national cohesion within Indonesian democracy, often in the name of identity groupings.

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