

Populist Parties and Pork-Barrel Politics in Indonesia: The Erosion of Political Morality

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of populist parties and "pork barrel" politics in Indonesia often emerges with promises of radical change and claims to represent the "voice of the people." However, in practice, these parties frequently become entangled in corruption, nepotism, and clientelism, undermining political integrity and public trust. "Pork barrel" politics in Indonesia refers to the strategic and often inequitable distribution of state resources, such as regional development projects or social assistance programs, used to secure political support. This study examines how these practices erode not only political morality and democratic integrity but also the social and psychological underpinnings of public trust in government institutions. Employing a qualitative approach with case studies and document analysis, the research explores corruption cases involving public officials and the broader societal impacts of "pork barrel" politics. The findings reveal that these practices have not only degraded the ethical standards of political actors but have also fostered widespread public cynicism, exacerbating a psychological sense of distrust and disillusionment with the political system. To address these challenges, the study highlights the need for systemic reforms, including greater transparency in budget allocation, robust legal enforcement against corruption, and political education that prioritises ethical behaviour, civic responsibility, and trust-building. This study's novelty lies in its analysis of how pork-barrel practices in Indonesia not only affect political integrity but also erode public trust at a psychological level, an area that remains underexplored in current literature.

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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of populism has reshaped political landscapes globally over the past decade, often emerging as a response to public dissatisfaction with entrenched political elites. In Indonesia, populist parties have gained traction by positioning themselves as the "voice of the people" and pledging radical reform. However, these promises frequently give way to patterns of corruption, nepotism, and political patronage once these parties attain power, undermining public trust and the ethical foundations of the political system.

One particularly troubling manifestation of this is pork-barrel politics, a practice characterised by the strategic allocation of government funds to projects aimed at securing political support. In Indonesia, this practice takes various forms, including politicised infrastructure developments, community grants, and social assistance programs. While these projects are often justified as efforts to improve public welfare, they frequently prioritise narrow political interests over broader developmental goals, eroding public confidence in governance. This phenomenon was prominently highlighted in the documentary *Dirty Vote* (2024), which exposed how social assistance programs (bansos) are co-opted as tools for securing voter loyalty, revealing the intersection of populist strategies and pork-barrel politics in Indonesia's contemporary political arena.

Historically rooted in the United States, the term "pork barrel" referred to the practice of diverting public funds to localised projects to secure constituent support. In Indonesia, this practice has evolved into a systemic challenge across national,

provincial, and local levels, fueled by weak oversight mechanisms and a lack of accountability. As various studies (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015) (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015; Riyanti et al., 2023) have demonstrated, pork-barrel politics erodes democratic principles, fosters public cynicism, and diminishes political morality by prioritising short-term electoral gains over long-term societal development. These practices not only undermine governance efficiency but also deepen psychological disillusionment among citizens, further polarising the political landscape.

The interplay between populist politics and pork-barrel practices is particularly concerning for its impact on political morality and public trust. Political morality, the ethical standards guiding politicians' behaviour, becomes increasingly compromised when public funds are misappropriated for political advantage. Simultaneously, public trust, a critical component of democratic legitimacy, is eroded as citizens perceive governance to be driven by self-interest rather than the common good. The psychological dimension of trust, rooted in citizens' expectations of fairness and transparency, is significantly undermined, leading to widespread disillusionment and disengagement from political processes.

For example, studies (Kurniadi & Ulzikri, 2022; Marasabessy et al., 2024) reveal how pork-barrel practices, such as inflating budgets for infrastructure projects or using surplus funds for community grants, are often framed as welfare initiatives but primarily serve to bolster the political capital of specific actors. This manipulation of public resources not only perpetuates inefficiency but also normalises unethical behaviour, weakening the institutional integrity necessary for sustainable governance.

To address these challenges, it is essential to balance technocratic considerations with political realities. Effective reforms must enhance transparency in budget allocation, strengthen anti-corruption measures, and promote ethical political education that emphasises trust-building and moral accountability. Furthermore, fostering a psychologically informed and vigilant electorate can mitigate the harmful effects of populist rhetoric and pork-barrel politics. Citizens need to critically evaluate the motives behind social assistance programs and other populist policies, ensuring that public funds genuinely serve developmental needs rather than political agendas.

In this context, the critical question arises: How do populist politics and pork-barrel practices in Indonesia affect the morality of politicians, public trust, and the integrity of the democratic system? More importantly, what measures can be taken to address these issues and rebuild the public's confidence in governance? By understanding the interplay between political and psychological dimensions, this study aims to provide actionable insights into addressing these systemic challenges and fostering a more ethical, transparent, and trust-based political culture in Indonesia.

Literature Review

Pork-barrel politics has been widely studied in various democratic contexts, emphasising its role in shaping political incentives and the distribution of public resources. In their study "*Regional Grants as Pork Barrel Politics*," Milligan and Smart (2021) examine how the allocation of regional development grants in Canada is influenced by political and electoral considerations. Their findings demonstrate that politicians may direct funds strategically to electorally valuable constituencies, revealing the intersection between public finance and political interests (Milligan & Smart, 2021).

This study serves as a foundational reference for understanding how political motivations drive the allocation of public funds. However, while Milligan and Smart focus on economic and electoral incentives in Canada, they do not address how such practices might affect political integrity or democratic values, issues that are particularly pressing in developing democracies like Indonesia.

Building on this, the seminal work by Maskin and Tirole (2019), titled "*Pandering and Pork-Barrel Politics*," analyses the behaviour of politicians who seek re-election by channelling resources to targeted interest groups. Their model shows that politicians often prioritise short-term electoral gains over long-term policy effectiveness (Maskin & Tirole, 2019). While this study provides a theoretical basis for understanding the strategic logic behind pork-barrel politics, it remains situated within a general economic framework and does not explore the socio-political

consequences of such behaviour in developing political systems characterised by corruption and patronage, such as Indonesia.

In the Indonesian context, a more localised study by Saragintan and Hidayat (2017), “*Pork Barrel Politics in Indonesia: The Case of Grants and Social Assistance in Banten Province in 2011*,” examines the allocation of community grants and social assistance. Their research highlights the use of public funds for political gain during the pre-election period in Banten. While this study is important in exposing the operational dynamics of pork-barrel practices at the provincial level, it does not explore the broader ethical and institutional consequences, such as the erosion of public trust or political morality at the national level.

The existing literature reveals several recurring themes: political motivations behind budget allocations, the use of public funds for electoral purposes, and the existence of patronage-based systems in both developed and developing democracies. However, a critical gap remains: few studies analyse the moral, democratic, and institutional consequences of pork-barrel politics, particularly in Indonesia.

This article seeks to fill that gap by shifting the focus from technical allocation mechanisms to the normative impact of pork-barrel politics. Specifically, it examines how populist parties in Indonesia engage in pork-barrel politics to strengthen their political base, and how such strategies ultimately erode political morality, weaken democratic institutions, and foster public distrust. By linking economic behaviour with moral and institutional consequences, this study contributes a new dimension to the discourse on distributive politics in emerging democracies.

Thus, this literature review not only frames the theoretical context but also strengthens the analytical foundation of the research by clearly identifying the gap this article aims to address—namely, the undermining of democratic integrity and public morality through the politically motivated allocation of public resources in Indonesia.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study method to examine the dynamics and implications of populist parties and pork barrel politics in Indonesia. The study involves a systematic process of data collection, classification, and analysis to understand the phenomenon under investigation. The methodology is designed to identify patterns, themes, and trends related to pork barrel political practices and to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of these practices on political morality, public trust, and democratic integrity.

1. Data Collection

Data collection is primarily based on document analysis. The sources include literature, journal articles, investigative reports, policy documents, political speeches, and other relevant materials that discuss *pork barrel* politics in Indonesia. These documents were selected to provide a broad understanding of the political, economic, and social context in which pork barrel politics operates. The focus is on identifying key instances of pork barrel practices, particularly concerning populist parties and election periods.

2. Data Analysis

a. Classification and Categorisation

The collected documents and case studies are first classified based on characteristics such as the types of pork barrel politics practised, the political motives behind these practices, and the specific strategies used by populist parties. This classification helps structure the data into manageable categories for further analysis.

b. Identification of Key Themes

The next step involves identifying emerging themes from the documents and case studies. These themes may include political corruption, electoral manipulation, resource allocation, and the erosion of democratic values. This thematic analysis is essential to uncover the broader patterns underlying *pork barrel* politics.

c. Interpretation and Understanding

Finally, the data are analysed in-depth to interpret the dynamics and implications of *pork barrel* politics. This analysis focuses on understanding the factors driving these practices, such as the motivations of populist parties, and the consequences for political morality, public trust, and the stability of democratic institutions in Indonesia. The aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of how these practices affect political life and governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Populism and Pork Barrel Politics: A Symbiotic Relationship

In the Indonesian context, the dynamics of populism and "pork barrel" politics are especially prominent during simultaneous and regional elections. Populist parties often capitalise on their proximity to "the people," using emotionally charged rhetoric and promises of large-scale, localised projects to attract voter support (Sahlan & Ahmad, 2023). These promises, while seemingly beneficial in the short term, often mask corrupt practices that undermine the integrity of the political system. Populist politicians often allocate public funds to narrowly focused projects, sidelining the broader developmental needs of society (Maskin & Tirole, 2019). These projects often lack long-term developmental impacts and instead serve as tools for securing political loyalty, leading to inefficiency and the misallocation of public resources.

a. Accelerated Implementation of Populist Projects

As elections approach, populist politicians often accelerate the execution of projects such as infrastructure development, social assistance programs, or scholarships to gain voter support. However, these initiatives frequently fail to align with actual community needs (Ramadhanti et al., 2024). The allocation of funds for such projects is often marred by corrupt practices, including budget mark-ups, fund misappropriation, or the awarding of contracts to political cronies. These actions divert resources from essential projects and erode public trust in the political system. When citizens perceive that public resources are exploited for political gain, they may disengage from political participation, reinforcing voter apathy and diminishing democratic legitimacy (Hidayatullah, 2022).

The prioritisation of short-term, highly visible projects over long-term development exacerbates governance challenges. These initiatives, though marketed as public benefits, often serve electoral rather than developmental objectives. Misallocation of funds further undermines public spending integrity, diverting resources from crucial sectors like education, healthcare, and public services. This perpetuates a culture of corruption and deepens public scepticism toward political leadership.

The erosion of trust due to these corrupt practices has significant consequences. Disillusioned citizens may withdraw from civic engagement, perceiving political participation as futile. As Hidayatullah (2022) notes, such apathy weakens democratic processes and threatens political legitimacy. In Indonesia, where corruption and political patronage are longstanding issues, these practices obstruct democratic consolidation. Addressing them requires reforms to enhance transparency, accountability, and alignment of development projects with genuine community needs. Promoting a political culture that prioritises long-term, equitable policy development over populist appeals is crucial to restoring trust and strengthening democratic governance.

b. Club Goods vs. Pork Barrel Politics: Unpacking Political Strategies

Political researchers differentiate between two forms of money politics: club goods and pork barrel politics. Club goods refer to resources or services provided by a candidate, often funded personally or through collective donations, to benefit a specific community (Chalik, 2017). These may include road construction, public facility development, and in-kind donations like food or clothing (Satria, 2019). Politicians may also organise public service programs, such as health clinics or educational scholarships, as voter engagement strategies (Hariyanto, 2021).

In contrast, pork barrel politics involves using public funds, such as the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD), to finance projects that primarily serve political interests. A common example is the distribution of social assistance (bansos) in exchange for electoral support (Evans, 2011). While legally sanctioned, such practices distort

political competition by giving incumbents an unfair advantage, especially when assistance is distributed close to elections. This strategy fosters moral indebtedness among voters, thereby compromising electoral objectivity (Qotimah et al., 2024).

The distinction between club goods and pork barrel politics provides insights into the mechanisms of political patronage in Indonesia. Both strategies involve resource allocation to secure electoral support but differ in their funding sources and democratic implications. The use of public funds for politically motivated assistance blurs the line between governance and electoral strategy, weakening democratic competition. As Qotimah et al. (2024) highlight, such practices manipulate voter perceptions and reinforce clientelistic relationships, ultimately undermining electoral integrity and governance accountability.

2. Characteristics of "Pork Barrel" Politics in Indonesia

Pork barrel politics is a common phenomenon in government practice in many countries, including Indonesia. The term refers to budget allocations used for projects that benefit specific electoral districts, often intending to gain political support (Milligan & Smart, 2021). Although originally intended to accelerate regional development, this practice has evolved into one of the most common and corrupt forms of misuse of public funds, creating a range of problems that undermine political integrity and public trust in government. Here are some characteristics of pork barrel politics (Hafel & Ibrahim, 2024):

- a. In inefficient Budget Allocation, public funds are allocated to projects that are not necessarily urgent or important, but rather projects that can bring popularity to politicians in their constituencies. This leads to sub-optimal use of the budget and often does not match the priority needs of the community at large.
- b. Lack of Transparency: The process of allocating funds for these projects is often not done transparently. Decisions are made based on political considerations rather than objective needs analysis or feasibility studies.
- c. Corruption and Nepotism, "pig barrel" politics, open up opportunities for corruption and nepotism. Funds allocated for these projects are often channelled through opaque channels and can involve awarding contracts to relatives or political cronies.
- d. Local Political Influence: This practice gives local politicians strong leverage to control budget allocations in their areas, often to strengthen their political support base. This can result in unfairness in resource distribution and uneven development projects.

a. Conversion of SILPA Fund into Community Grants

The conversion of SILPA (Unspent Budget Surplus) funds into grants is often used by political parties to demonstrate their commitment to community welfare (Sugiyarto, 2019). However, in practice, these grants are frequently allocated in a non-transparent and inefficient manner. This tactic allows political parties to appear responsive to community needs, particularly in the lead-up to elections. While these programs may seem beneficial, they are often poorly planned and primarily aimed at securing short-term political support. Consequently, fund allocation becomes inefficient and fails to address long-term community needs, leading to public distrust in the government as people perceive these initiatives as politically driven rather than genuinely intended to improve public welfare.

Furthermore, populist programs derived from SILPA conversion may foster dependency on sporadic handouts, diverting attention from more effective and sustainable long-term solutions. For example, rather than implementing a comprehensive agricultural policy, the government may focus solely on distributing free fertilisers. Similarly, scholarships may be provided without corresponding efforts to enhance the quality of education. Infrastructure projects, such as road repairs or the renovation of places of worship, may be prioritised in politically strategic areas, neglecting regions with greater needs.

In the long run, this practice can hinder sustainable development and exacerbate societal inequalities. Addressing this issue requires fundamental changes in budget management, emphasising transparency, meticulous planning, and the implementation of programs oriented toward sustainable and equitable outcomes for the entire community.

In simultaneous and regional elections, there have been cases where incumbents seeking re-election have used SILPA funds to provide grants in the form of direct cash assistance, public facility construction, and small infrastructure projects (Jhon Piter Situmeang, 2019). While these initiatives appear beneficial, they are frequently exploited to garner political support, undermining public confidence in government budget allocations. This fosters public scepticism, as citizens increasingly perceive these funds as tools for political gain rather than as resources genuinely intended to meet public needs.

b. Use of Non-Budgetary Funds for Political Gain

Non-budgetary funds refer to APBN allocations that have not been specifically allocated to certain budget items. Political parties in power often utilise these "idle" funds to fund community social assistance, often by leveraging village policies. (Julie Ballington, Elin Falguera, 2016). Non-budgetary funds are often used for projects that are poorly planned and lack adequate oversight. This practice allows political parties to use the funds for political gain without going through a transparent process.

Ruling political parties often use non-budgetary funds for projects that appear to benefit the community, but are intended to strengthen their political support. Common examples include direct cash transfers, basic food assistance programs, small infrastructure developments in villages, and similar projects that can be directly felt by the community.

By utilising village policies, political parties can show that they care about the welfare of village communities (Rahmani, 2022). However, often these projects do not go through a transparent planning process and are not based on the real needs of the community. As a result, the allocation of funds is inefficient, and the projects do not provide significant long-term benefits.

- a. Direct Cash Assistance (BLT), non-budgetary funds, are often used for BLT programs announced close to elections. While this aid helps people in the short term, there is no long-term plan included to structurally address poverty issues.
- b. Village Infrastructure Development, construction of roads, bridges and other public facilities is often done without proper planning. Such projects frequently target areas aligned with the political party's support base of the political party.
- c. Basic Food Assistance Program, political parties may also use non-budgetary funds to provide basic food assistance to village communities. While this helps people in the short term, without a sustainable policy, this program cannot effectively address food security issues.

The use of non-budgetary funds without proper planning can undermine public trust in the government. The public may see that these actions are more of a political strategy than a genuine effort to improve their welfare. Without a transparent planning and monitoring process, the use of non-budgetary funds is likely to be inefficient. The projects funded may not provide maximum benefits and may only become a tool to gain political support. Reliance on sporadic aid and short-term projects hinders sustainable development. Non-budgetary funds should be allocated to programs that have a long-term and sustainable impact on society.

3. Erosion of Political Morality in Indonesia

The erosion of political morality in Indonesia is not merely the result of individual failures but reflects a deeper structural malaise within the country's governance system. This decline is particularly evident in the persistence of corrupt practices such as pork barrel politics—a phenomenon where politicians prioritise the distribution of public resources based on electoral interests rather than objective societal needs. In such a system, unethical behaviour is normalised, and the moral expectations of public officials are diminished.

At the heart of this issue is the intertwining of weak law enforcement, patron-client relationships, and the instrumentalisation of state resources. Politicians often divert public funds, including social assistance programs, to secure loyalty and maintain power. As a result, political decisions are driven less by public service considerations and

more by transactional logic. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the manipulation of Bantuan Langsung Tunai Dana Desa (BLT-DD), a direct village cash transfer program aimed at supporting vulnerable populations, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

a. Legal and Institutional Framework

The BLT-DD program is regulated under the Village Law (Undang-Undang No. 6 Tahun 2014), which mandates that village financial management be participatory, transparent, and accountable. Supporting regulations include Permendagri No. 113/2014 on Village Financial Management, Peraturan Pemerintah No. 60/2014 on Village Funds, and the more recent Permendesa PDTT No. 13/2023, which defines the priority use of village funds. The disbursement process is further monitored via platforms such as OM-SPAN, as outlined in Peraturan Menteri Keuangan No. 145 Tahun 2023.

Despite this comprehensive framework, implementation remains deeply flawed. Institutional oversight is often weak and, in many instances, compromised. Corruption and political clientelism continue to obstruct effective governance at the village level.

b. 2 Case Study: Misuse of BLT-DD in South Sumatra

A prominent example of political immorality and fund misappropriation occurred on June 12, 2020, in Musi Rawas and Ogan Ilir regencies, South Sumatra. Village officials reduced the amount of aid from IDR 600,000 to IDR 400,000 per household, with the remainder distributed to individuals not officially listed as beneficiaries. This manipulation, while presented as an effort to accommodate broader needs, clearly violated technical procedures and ethical principles (Inge, 2020).

An informant reported:

“For instance, BLT-DD was supposed to be distributed to 200 households, but about 400 people came to the village office. Those not receiving the aid protested, claiming they too were impacted by COVID-19” (Samsudin, 2020).

While some cases proceeded through legal channels, others were resolved administratively, revealing inconsistencies in enforcement. These incidents underscore how crises can expose and exacerbate weaknesses in local governance, allowing public funds to be weaponised for personal or political gain.

c. Oversight and Systemic Weaknesses

Institutions such as the Audit Board of Indonesia (BPK) and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) have consistently flagged the misuse of village funds. In 2022, BPK’s audit of 28 regions revealed significant weaknesses in targeting and accountability (Budirahardjo & Baskara, 2019). The KPK received over 600 complaints regarding the misappropriation of village funds in 2017 alone, indicating a rising trend of corruption at the grassroots level.

The KPK has repeatedly warned about the vulnerability of BLT-DD and similar programs to misuse due to inadequate oversight mechanisms and the prevalence of patronage networks. These systemic flaws contribute to the normalisation of unethical conduct among local and national political actors.

d. Normalisation of Corruption and Decline of Political Morality

The misuse of BLT-DD illustrates how corruption has become an expected component of the political process. Political morality deteriorates when public officials perceive corruption not as a violation but as a functional necessity to secure support or fulfil reciprocal obligations. This is exacerbated by weak institutional independence, particularly among local legislatures and auditing bodies, which lack the autonomy or courage to hold officials accountable.

As a result, a culture of impunity prevails, in which unethical behaviour goes unpunished and, in some cases, is rewarded. Patron-client dynamics at the village level reinforce this moral erosion, as politicians distribute resources selectively to consolidate political loyalty, rather than based on equitable public needs.

CONCLUSION

Populist parties often exploit public sentiment through pork-barrel politics, strategically allocating government funds for political gain rather than public welfare. This practice undermines political integrity, distorts the democratic process, and erodes public trust in institutions. By prioritising power retention over transparency and accountability, politicians fail in their moral responsibility to serve the people fairly.

Beyond trust erosion, pork-barrel politics also hinder sustainable development, as short-term political survival takes precedence over long-term community needs. This fosters dependency, weakens public services, and exacerbates social inequalities, particularly in a diverse country like Indonesia.

To counter these challenges, reforms must focus on transparency, accountability, and ethical governance. Strengthening political education and enabling citizen oversight are crucial steps in restoring public trust. By addressing both the structural and moral dimensions of governance, Indonesia can build a more stable, inclusive, and sustainable political system.

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