
Regional Elections Conducted by the Regional People's Representative Council and the Shifting Meaning of People's Sovereignty in Political Communication Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the discourse on the election of regional heads by local legislatures and its implications for the shifting meaning of popular sovereignty in Indonesian democracy. The research is motivated by the reemergence of proposals for indirect local elections, which raise constitutional, sociological, and political debates. The research problem focused on how changes in the electoral mechanism affect the relationship between popular will, political legitimacy, and political communication practices. This study employs a qualitative approach through a literature review of academic works, legal regulations, and Constitutional Court decisions. The analysis applies Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of popular sovereignty, Carole Pateman's participatory democracy, and Dan Nimmo's political communication theory. The findings indicate that elections conducted by local legislatures tend to strengthen elite-driven democracy, reduce direct citizen participation, and shift political legitimacy toward political elites. The study concludes that this transformation narrows the substantive meaning of popular sovereignty in local democratic practices.

INTRODUCTION

Amendments to the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia have made a number of relatively fundamental changes to the regional head election (*Pilkada*) system in Indonesia (Kurniawan et al., 2024; Noor & Kamarudin, 2017; Susantri, 2022). *Pilkada* itself is one part of the framework of democratic mechanisms in Indonesia (Riqiey, 2023). In fact, it has become one of the main pillars of the democratic system. As a foundation for the implementation of *Pilkada*, it is regulated in the constitution or more precisely in Article 18 paragraph (4) (MPR RI, 1945). In this article, the head of the regional government (chief of local government) includes the Governor, Regent, and Mayor. Regarding the election mechanism in this article, it is carried out by means of "democratically elected". In this country, there is popular sovereignty as a principle of humanity and deliberation, there is active participation of the community in the process of determining life together in the political field (Syamsiani & Addiansyah, 2025).

The principle of popular sovereignty is a fundamental pillar of a state based on the rule of law (*rechtsstaat*), ensuring that power is not absolute. In this conception, law is positioned as a manifestation of the will of the people, so every state policy must have a strong basis of legitimacy within the community. Without recognition of popular sovereignty, state authority will lose its democratic spirit and tend to degenerate into formal legalism that prioritizes legal

certainty without regard for social justice (Putri & Ernawati, 2026).

Regional head elections have become a significant topic in Indonesia following the proposal that regional heads be elected by the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) rather than through direct elections. Modern, large-scale democracy, according to Robert Dahl, requires six key elements: first, officials elected through representative mechanisms, so that constitutional policy decisions rest with the people's representatives; second, free, fair, and regular elections; third, freedom of expression without threat of punishment; fourth, citizen access to alternative sources of information; fifth, associational autonomy, including the freedom to form political parties and interest groups; and sixth, inclusive citizenship rights, including the right to vote and run for office (Pambudi et al., 2025). These six elements are the foundation for ensuring public participation, official accountability, and the legitimacy of the democratic process.

Constitutionally, Indonesia adheres to a democratic system as outlined in the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which serves as the supreme legal basis for state governance. Indonesian democracy guarantees citizen freedom, but remains within the boundaries regulated by law as a representation of the will of the people. In this regard, the people hold supreme power or possess sovereignty. The amendments to the 1945 Constitution marked a significant milestone in political and constitutional reform in Indonesia, reinforcing the principle that power derives from the people. In a modern democratic system, regulations jointly established to guarantee the rights of the people are called a constitution. In Indonesia, this constitution is embodied in the 1945 Constitution, which serves as the foundation of national life and guarantees the protection of citizens' rights.

This popular sovereignty is expressly and clearly stipulated in the Indonesian constitution. This basis, as enshrined in the preamble to the fourth paragraph, states, "The independence of the Indonesian nation is therefore formulated in a Constitution of the State of Indonesia, which has the sovereignty of the people..."

Then, the sovereignty of the people is further emphasized in Article 1 paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution which explains that the sovereignty of the state is entirely in the hands of the people and its implementation is based on the Constitution. Therefore, the 1945 Constitution is clearly based on a democratic system of government because it prioritizes the sovereignty of the people. The principle of the sovereignty of the people itself is the core of democracy and is adopted in many state constitutions. However, each country has its own system and mechanism in implementing this principle. Direct elections have been considered a representation of the principle of the sovereignty of the people in Indonesian democracy in accordance with Article 1 paragraph 2 of the 1945 Constitution. The real manifestation of the sovereignty of the people is the election as a means for the people to directly elect representatives and leaders. Figures such as John Locke, Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau became pioneers of this theory, where Rousseau emphasized the importance of the general will as a manifestation of the sovereignty of the people. Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated (Alrah, 2019),

“In an ideal social collective, the opinions, interests, and preferences of individuals are consolidated in the “general will,” the only legally valid sovereign authority because it encompasses and transcends the individual wills of its members. In such a regime, laws that conform to the general will are

neither coercive nor unjust, since no one can coerce or do anything unjust.”

Each individual has their own will, but on the other hand, there is also the interest of individuals in maintaining social relations. This latter is called the general will (*volonte generale*). The state's duty is to carry out the general will of the people. This means that the will of the people is identical to the will of the state. The people own the state, not the rulers. The people are the owners of sovereignty (Erham, 2022). In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of popular sovereignty, legitimate power derives from the general will of the people. Rousseau emphasized that political legitimacy arises from a social agreement that places the collective will as the basis of government. Direct regional elections became a concrete instrument for the people to express this will.

The urgency of this research is underscored by the recent, explicit stance of several parliamentary parties. As documented by CNN Indonesia (2025), a majority of parties, including Gerindra, Golkar, PKB, PAN, Nasdem, and Demokrat, have declared their support for DPRD-led *Pilkada*, citing efficiency and stability. This political shift, if realized, would represent a fundamental change in Indonesian local democracy. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze this discourse not merely as a legal or technical proposal but as a political phenomenon that redefines the relationship between citizens and the state. The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach, integrating theories of popular sovereignty (Rousseau), participatory democracy (Pateman), and political communication (Nimmo) to analyze the contemporary discourse on *Pilkada*. Unlike previous legalistic studies, this research focuses on how political elites construct and communicate new meanings of democracy and sovereignty to legitimize a shift toward an elitist electoral model.

When this mechanism was changed to elections by the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), the people's direct connection to legitimate power was severed. This shift raised questions about the meaning of sovereignty in contemporary political practice. This phenomenon not only demonstrates changes in election mechanisms but also changes in the meaning of popular sovereignty, citizen participation, and political communication between elites and the public.

Based on the constitutional framework, the theory of popular sovereignty, and the dynamics of the regional head election discourse outlined above, an analytical approach capable of interpreting this issue more systematically and measurably is needed. The debate over the mechanism for regional head elections concerns not only legal norms and institutional design but also how the meaning of popular sovereignty is produced, communicated, and contested by political actors. Therefore, this research is structured using a method that allows for the exploration of the relationship between changes in the regional head election mechanism, the arguments of political elites, and their implications for democratic participation and legitimacy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used a literature study design with interpretive qualitative analysis techniques. The author selects literature sources based on theoretical relevance and the Indonesian empirical context, particularly those discussing regional elections, popular sovereignty, democracy, and political communication. The literature analyzed includes

constitutions, laws, Constitutional Court decisions, national and international scientific journal articles, and classical and contemporary theoretical books. The selection process was conducted purposively, considering academic credibility, the novelty of ideas, and their contribution to scientific debates on democracy and political legitimacy. The collected data were then classified into main themes, such as popular sovereignty, political participation, representation, and elite communication framing. Data analysis techniques were carried out through critical reading and conceptual interpretation of the texts studied. The author links normative arguments in legislation with the theoretical framework used to uncover the tension between procedural and participatory democracy. The analysis also focuses on the political discourse constructed by party elites and state actors related to the regional elections conducted by the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*), examining how language, symbols, and constitutional claims are used to construct policy legitimacy. Through this approach, the research seeks to generate a comprehensive understanding of the shifting meaning of popular sovereignty and its implications for political communication practices in contemporary Indonesian democracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A literature review showed that popular sovereignty normatively grants the people the highest legitimacy to elect their leaders through a direct mechanism. In the context of regional elections, direct elections ensure the people play an active role in determining regional leaders and contribute to the process of political accountability. Rousseau stated that sovereignty is the general will of the people, which cannot be fully represented because legitimacy arises only from the people's direct expression of their will. Direct elections mean that the people have a collective voice in determining their leaders, who in turn have strong legitimacy to exercise power.

In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau introduced the concept of *volonté générale* as the collective will that should serve as the moral and political foundation of society. This emphasis provides an opportunity for humans to build balanced relationships with one another. In this context, Rousseau emphasized the existence of freedom that creates balance in communal life. Similarly, John Locke, in Wijaya, argued that the presence of a social contract system within a state is seen as legitimizing political authority to limit the authority of each subject and the rights of each political elite among all human beings born free and equal (Solosumantoro, 2025).

Carole Pateman, in her theory of participatory democracy, highlights the importance of direct citizen involvement in the political decision-making process. Participation goes beyond simply voting; it expands citizens' capacity to influence political decisions at all levels of life. When the regional head election mechanism was changed to elections by the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*), the space for direct citizen involvement became increasingly limited, thus leading to the loss of political learning and citizen awareness, which are the core of participatory democracy.

Political communication theory helps explain how political elites can shape new narratives about sovereignty and legitimacy through policy decisions. The process of elite political communication with the public plays a role in shaping public perceptions about changes in electoral mechanisms. In political science, there are several variants of concepts related to the concept of power, each with its own definition, such as influencer, persuasion,

manipulation, coercion, force, or the use of physical force (Hutapea, 2024). When elites dominate the narrative, the resulting political meaning tends to favor positions that benefit the elite, potentially altering public understanding of power and participation.

Modern democratic theory emphasizes the importance of political parties as a central pillar of the democratic system. Political parties play a role in organizing the diverse interests and aspirations of society and bridging the gap between the public and the government. In the Indonesian context, political parties have become an integral part of the development of democracy after the reform era (Saputra et al., 2024). Thus, the attitude of political parties should be inclined towards the aspirations of the people regarding regional elections being chosen by the *DPRD*. As a bridge to the people's voice, political parties must act according to the will of the people, not arbitrarily proposing and creating polemics that take away the sovereignty of the people's right to vote.

Table 1. Attitudes of Parliamentary Parties Regarding Regional Elections by the *DPRD*

Yes	Party Name	Attitude	Description
1	Gerindra	Support	Through the Secretary General of the Sugiono Party, Gerindra is in a position to support efforts or plans to carry out this election by the <i>DPRD</i> at the regent, mayor or governor level.
2	Golkar	Support	Member of Commission II of the House of Representatives from the Golkar faction, Ahmad Irawan, said his party supported the proposal from the beginning. Irawan considered the regional elections through the <i>DPRD</i> as a form of people's sovereignty which was considered constitutional.
3	PKB	Support	Through Cak Imin, the Regional Elections are directly unproductive and many democratic systems are ineffective, we will evaluate
4	PAN	Support	Deputy Chairman of PAN, Viva Yoga Mauladi stated that his party supports the Golkar Party's proposal to restore the regional elections to be carried out through the <i>DPRD</i> only.
5	Nasdem	Support	Chairman of Commission II of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia M. Rifqinizamy Karsayuda stated that the discourse on the regional elections through the <i>DPRD</i> , Nasdem remains of the opinion that the regional elections through the <i>DPRD</i> are constitutionally aligned.
6	Democrat	Support	Secretary General of the Democratic Party's Central Leadership Council (DPP) Herman Khaeron, the Democratic Party is in line with President Prabowo Subianto in responding to the regional head election system.
7	SMEs	Review/Weigh	Member of Commission II of the House of Representatives from the PKS faction, Mardani Ali Sera, considered the regional elections through the <i>DPRD</i> only for the district level.
8	PDIP	Decline	PDIP Spokesperson Guntur Romli said that PDIP rejected this discourse because it had been regulated in

the 1945 Constitution and there was even a Constitutional Court decision that supported direct elections.

Source: CNN Indonesia, 2025

Table 1 maps the parliamentary parties' attitudes toward the discourse of regional elections (*Pilkada*) through the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) and reveals a political pattern consistent with power relations and elite communication strategies. The majority of parties Gerindra, Golkar, PKB, PAN, NasDem, and Demokrat expressed their support with relatively uniform arguments. The narratives they used emphasized the efficiency of democracy, the stability of regional government, and the constitutionality of elections through representative institutions. This argumentation pattern demonstrates how the supporting parties framed the *Pilkada* issue not as a reduction in popular sovereignty, but as a rationalization of procedural democracy. From Jean-Jacques Rousseau's perspective, this position marks a shift in the meaning of the general will, from a will expressed directly by the people to a will mediated entirely by representative institutions and party elites.

The PKS's position of reviewing or considering demonstrates the ambiguity of political communication. PKS neither openly rejected nor fully supported the idea, but limited the possibility of implementing *Pilkada* through the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) to a certain level. This strategy can be interpreted as an effort to maintain an electoral base critical of the reduction in popular participation, while still allowing room for political compromise at the elite level. In contrast, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P)'s firm rejection emphasized the use of symbols of popular sovereignty and constitutional legitimacy as the primary message of its political communication. By referencing the 1945 Constitution and Constitutional Court rulings, the PDI-P constructed a framework that asserted that direct elections are a manifestation of substantive democracy and citizen participation that cannot be replaced by mere representative mechanisms.

Within the framework of Carole Pateman's theory of participatory democracy, the composition of attitudes in Table 1 indicates a weakening commitment to direct citizen participation in political decision-making. The majority of parties favored an elitist model of democracy that positions the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) as the primary actor, while the people are positioned indirectly in the political process. Nimmo's political communication theory helps explain that this difference in attitudes is not merely a difference in policy but also a contestation over the meaning of democracy in the public sphere. Supporting parties use top-down political communication to shape public perceptions of efficiency and constitutionality, while opposing parties use symbolic communication to reaffirm democracy as a participatory practice of popular sovereignty. The structure of attitudes in this table strengthens the argument that the discourse on regional elections (*Pilkada*) by the *DPRD* is a crucial arena for shifting the meaning of popular sovereignty in contemporary political communication practices.

Furthermore, the results of this study show that the debate over the regional head elections (*Pilkada*) by the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) also reflects a shift in the orientation of local democracy from participation to power management. The arguments for efficiency and stability put forward by political elites indicate a shift in focus

from strengthening citizen capacity to controlling the political process for easier management by representative institutions and political parties. In this context, regional head elections are no longer understood as a space for articulating the will of the people, but rather as an administrative instrument in regional governance. The implication of this condition is the emergence of a symbolic distance between the people and the elected regional head, where political legitimacy derives more from the configuration of power within the *DPRD* than from direct citizen support. This confirms that changes in the *Pilkada* mechanism have the potential to shift the function of local democracy from a means of political empowerment of the people to a political procedure oriented towards elite stability.

From the perspective of political communication as explained by Nimmo, the process of forming political meaning occurs through symbolic interactions between political elites and the public. The transfer of regional elections to the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) changes the political narrative because the elite become the primary determinants of electoral policy. Political communication in this context has the potential to create new meanings about the legitimacy of power that are closer to elite representation than the general will of the people. According to David V.J. Bell, political discourse can be divided into three main types: power discourse, influence discourse, and authority discourse. Power discourse involves influence through threats or promises, while influence discourse includes advice, encouragement, requests, and warnings. Authority discourse is the giving of orders or prohibitions, where the ruler, who has the right to be obeyed, is considered a legitimate voice of authority (Syauket et al., 2024). Meanwhile, in a broader political context, a shortcut strategy in building political literacy among young people can be implemented by developing skills in selecting quality political information (Wahyutama, 2023).

The political parties' stances and the way they communicate the regional head election discourse through the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) demonstrate that this debate extends beyond the technicalities of the election. Support, consideration, and opposition form a discursive arena that produces specific meanings about democracy, popular sovereignty, and the legitimacy of power. In this arena, political elites not only adopt policy positions but also direct public perception through narratives of efficiency, stability, or popular participation. The relationship between the public will, political representation, and authority is increasingly determined by the elite's ability to manage political communication. Therefore, the *DPRD's* regional head election discourse serves as a gateway to understanding the changing ways power is interpreted and exercised in today's Indonesian democracy.

Regional head elections, whether through the *DPRD* or directly by the people, are essentially democratic. This is reinforced by Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which stipulates that regional heads are elected democratically, without explicitly specifying whether elections must be direct or indirect. Both elections by the *DPRD* and the people are equally democratic as long as they adhere to the principles of substantive democracy. In its ruling No. 072-073/PUU-II/2004, the Constitutional Court emphasized that the concept of "democratically elected" can be interpreted as either direct or indirect elections, as long as they meet democratic principles (MK, 2004). This ruling provides a strong legal basis for the possible implementation of various models of regional head elections. This provides constitutional legitimacy for regional head elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) as representatives of the people.

The shift in the regional election mechanism from direct to through the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) reflects a shift in the meaning of popular sovereignty. Normatively, popular sovereignty is a fundamental principle of democracy that places supreme power in the hands of the people. Rousseau emphasized that the general will is the basis of political legitimacy. The direct mechanism in regional elections provides a channel for the people to collectively express their will. This shift reduces the people's role in determining regional leaders and shifts the legitimacy of regional elections from the people to the legislative elite.

These changes also need to be read within the framework of political decentralization as one of the instruments of democracy in the region. The goals to be achieved through decentralization are the values of the political community which can be in the form of national unity, democratic government, independence as the embodiment of autonomy, administrative efficiency and socio-economic development. Decentralization in practice, there are various forms, namely administrative decentralization, political decentralization, economic or market decentralization and fiscal or financial decentralization. Political decentralization is one of the forms and mechanisms of implementing democracy in the region, namely by implementing the change of regional heads through Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning Regional Elections regulating various technical provisions and principles of holding democratic elections. The principle of direct, general, free, secret, honest, and fair (*LUBER JURDIL*) is a normative principle that must be upheld in every election process (Mustajib, 2025). According to G. Shabbir Cheema and Dennis A. Rondinelli, political decentralization provides opportunities for local communities to participate in political decision-making that affects their lives. In this case, political decentralization can be realized either through direct elections or through democratic representation in the *DPRD* (Ridua, 2025).

Based on sociological aspects, the background to holding direct regional elections by the people is due to the emergence of various opinions that mention the advantages of direct regional elections, namely (Wati & Aryani, 2022):

1. Direct regional elections aim to eliminate the oligarchy of political parties which is the spirit of the organizational pattern of political parties within the *DPRD* environment, the interests of political party groups are often disguised and manipulated as if they were the interests of society in general;
2. The elected regional head will have a direct mandate from the people which will legitimize his leadership because he was directly elected by the people;
3. It allows for broad community participation within its constituents, rather than simply the free and arbitrary involvement of oligarchic parties in the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*), which do not represent the people's voice. Thus, direct community involvement is a manifestation of popular sovereignty.

In Pateman's theory of participatory democracy, the loss of direct citizen participation indicates a reduction in direct political experience, which is essential for building citizen political capacity (Pateman, 1970). When citizens become mere spectators in regional head elections, citizen political participation diminishes, potentially reducing the effectiveness of social control and accountability to leaders.

These findings demonstrate that the discourse of regional head elections (*Pilkada*) conducted by the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) cannot be understood

simply as a normatively equal democratic model, but as a political process fraught with power relations and elite communication strategies. Although the Constitutional Court has constitutionally allowed for interpretation of the phrase "democratically elected," the political practices accompanying this discourse demonstrate a tendency to strengthen the role of party elites rather than expand citizen participation. In this context, legal legitimacy does not automatically equate to sociological legitimacy. The majority of parties' support for regional head elections conducted by the *DPRD*, as shown in Table 1, reflects more the consolidation of political interests at the elite level than a response to the aspirations of the public, who have traditionally enjoyed the right to vote directly.

The analysis also reveals the paradox of political decentralization. Theoretically, decentralization aims to bring power closer to the people and expand local participation. However, the shift of regional elections to the Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) has the potential to alienate the people from the process of determining regional leaders. Representation, which was expected to be a bridge for the people's will, has become a political filtration mechanism largely determined by internal party logic. From this perspective, political decentralization loses its emancipatory function and tends toward centralizing power in the hands of local and national elites who control representative institutions.

From a political communication perspective, this study found that the discourse on regional elections by the *DPRD* is produced and circulated through a top-down communication pattern. Party elites and state officials construct framings of budget efficiency, government stability, and claims of constitutionality as dominant arguments in the public sphere. This pattern aligns with Nimmo's theory that elite political communication is not neutral but rather functions to shape meaning and build public acceptance of certain policies. In this context, the public is often positioned as an object of persuasion rather than a subject of political deliberation.

The Regional People's Representative Council (*DPRD*) interprets the regional elections as a meeting point between the shifting meaning of popular sovereignty, the transformation of political decentralization, and elite political communication practices. This suggests that the primary issue lies not in the constitutional validity of the election mechanism, but rather in the changing relationship between the people and the power that occurs behind it. When direct participation is reduced, citizens' political experience weakens, their capacity for social control declines, and democracy shifts toward an increasingly elitist form. This finding confirms that the *DPRD*'s debate over the regional elections reflects a more fundamental problem in Indonesian democracy: the tension between procedural democracy, political representation, and popular sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the discourse and the possibility of implementing the Regional Elections through the *DPRD* mark a shift in the meaning of people's sovereignty in the practice of Indonesian democracy. Constitutionally, the election of regional heads either directly or through the *DPRD* both has legal legitimacy, as interpreted by the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia and strengthened by the decision of the Constitutional Court. However, normatively and sociologically, direct elections have so far functioned as the main instrument of expression of the people's general will as well as a means of political learning for citizens at

the local level. When the mechanism is transferred to the *DPRD*, the direct relationship between the people and the legitimacy of the power of regional heads is weakened, and the people's sovereignty tends to be fully mediated by the political elite. The results of the discussion show that the shift in the mechanism of the Regional Elections cannot be separated from the dynamics of political decentralization and the practice of party-political communication. Decentralization, which should expand participation and bring power closer to the people, has the potential to narrow its meaning when citizen participation is reduced to indirect. The attitude of the majority of parliamentary parties who support the Regional Elections by the *DPRD*, as well as the framing of efficiency and stability developed, shows the dominance of top-down elite political communication. Within the framework of Rousseau's theory, this condition shifts the public will from the public sphere to the arena of elite negotiation. In Pateman's perspective, reduced participation directly has an impact on the weakening of citizens' political capacity and social control of power. Meanwhile, Nimmo's theory of political communication asserts that this change takes place through a process of meaning-formation controlled by the political elite. Thus, this study emphasizes that the main problem of the Regional Elections by the *DPRD* is not just the choice of institutional design, but concerns the direction of Indonesian democracy itself. This shift shows a tendency to strengthen elitist and procedural democracies that have the potential to distance the people from the practice of substantive sovereignty. Therefore, any attempt to change the mechanism of the Regional Elections needs to consider not only legal-constitutional aspects, but also its impact on citizen participation, the legitimacy of power, and the quality of democracy as a manifestation of people's sovereignty.

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