

# Enhancing Democratic Quality in Indonesia's Regional Elections: Governance Dynamics and Technological Pathways

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## Abstract

The discourse on regional head elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) has sparked both pros and cons among the public. The large budget and money politics are the reasons for this discourse. This has led some to question the rationality of the plan, as it is considered capable of minimizing public involvement and weakening democracy. However, various strategies exist to create more efficient regional elections. This study aims to discuss efforts to enhance the quality of democracy by creating more efficient regional head elections. The novelty of this research lies in the re-emergence of the discourse on indirect regional elections. Accordingly, this study seeks to identify which aspects of election budgeting contribute to inefficiency and to propose possible strategies to address these issues. This includes discussing the potential of combining judicial review mechanisms amid the risks associated with the adoption of technology in elections. The findings show that the main problems in regional elections—such as high political costs, money politics, oligarchic dominance, and weak transparency—are structural and institutional rather than caused solely by the direct election system. Therefore, improving local democracy should focus on reforming candidate recruitment, strengthening political funding accountability, and enhancing public oversight and political education. In addition, the integration of election technology has the potential to improve efficiency and transparency if supported by institutional readiness and efforts to reduce the digital divide.

**Keywords:** Decentralization; Democracy; Regional head elections; Technology.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the reformation era, democracy in Indonesia has shown progress. This progress is marked by public participation in both general elections and policy-making processes. The public has also been guaranteed the right to express themselves and publicly voice their opinions. However, over time,

democracy in Indonesia is facing serious challenges regarding the idea of electing regional heads through the Regional Representative Council (DPRD). This situation has sparked controversy and criticism from various parties, as it is perceived to undermine the quality of democracy in Indonesia. This proposal is claimed to reduce the cost of regional head elections (Pilkada). The effort to

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return Pilkada to the DPRD was previously advocated by the Red and White Coalition, the coalition supporting Prabowo Subianto and Hatta Rajasa, in parliament in 2014. Gerindra Party Secretary General Sugiono stated that grant funds from the regional budget (APBD) for the 2015 regional elections reached nearly IDR 7 trillion. In fact, by 2024, the regional election budget had increased drastically to over IDR 37 trillion (BBC, 2026). These figures are frequently used to justify arguments regarding the inefficiency and high cost of electoral politics in Indonesia.

This idea has naturally met with resistance from various parties. A Kompas poll cited democracy as the public's reason for wanting direct regional elections (Gitiyarko, 2026). The idea of direct elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) refers to an indirect election mechanism or representative system, in which the mandate for electing regional leaders is given to members of the legislature at the regional level, rather than directly by the people (Setyanto et al., 2020). This means the public is not directly involved by voting in elections. This results in the public being unable to freely elect their regional leaders. After nearly a decade of implementing direct elections, the government and the House of Representatives (DPR) passed Law No. 22 of 2014, which returned regional elections to the DPRD. This policy was quickly revoked through Government Regulation in Lieu of Law (Perpu) No. 1 of 2014 (later Law No. 1 of 2015) following massive public opposition, who felt their political rights were being violated (Hadi et al., 2025). This demonstrates that the

debate over direct and indirect regional elections has long been part of Indonesia's democratic discourse.

This discourse is ultimately divided into two opinions: those supporting and those opposing the discourse. Those who support elections through the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) argue that they can reduce the very high political costs, which in a direct election system often trigger corruption to recoup campaign funds. Furthermore, this mechanism is seen as creating a more stable and planned regional political environment because the process is conducted internally by political party representatives in the council (Hadi et al., 2025). Meanwhile, those who oppose it argue that this system is vulnerable to control by a handful of party elites and oligarchic interests, with decisions being made behind the scenes without public transparency (Ikhsan et al., 2024). As a result, regional leaders elected through the DPRD may become more accountable to political parties than to citizens, potentially weakening democratic responsiveness and public accountability (Hadi et al., 2025). Therefore, direct regional elections should remain the primary option in the process of determining regional leaders.

At the same time, the weaknesses within direct regional elections cannot be ignored. Problems such as high political costs, money politics, political polarization, electoral logistics expenses, and post-election conflicts continue to challenge the quality of democracy in Indonesia. Previous studies on Indonesia's regional elections have largely focused on political oligarchy, money politics, decentralization, and the

institutional debate surrounding direct and indirect local elections through the DPRD (Setyanto et al., 2020; Ikhsan et al., 2024; Hadi et al., 2025). Other studies have examined issues such as electoral governance, judicial activism, political education, and the adoption of digital technology in electoral processes (Amiruddin & Ramadani, 2023; Indra et al., 2025). However, these studies tend to discuss such issues separately and within fragmented analytical frameworks. Research on electoral technology mainly emphasizes technical challenges, cybersecurity, and the digital divide (Hardwick et al., 2018; Chafiq et al., 2024), while studies on judicial activism primarily focus on the expanding role of the Constitutional Court in regional election disputes (Amiruddin & Ramadani, 2023; Mochtar, 2025). Similarly, studies on political oligarchy and high political costs often concentrate on elite domination, political dowries, and weak party institutionalization without offering broader democratic reform frameworks (Efendi et al., 2022; Misran et al., 2021).

Consequently, limited research has comprehensively examined how governance reform, political education, technology adoption, and judicial activism can function as interconnected pathways to enhance democratic quality in Indonesia's regional elections. Existing literature still tends to treat political costs, electoral integrity, democratic participation, and election technology as separate issues rather than interconnected dimensions of democratic reform. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing governance dynamics and technological pathways as

complementary strategies to strengthen electoral accountability, reduce structural weaknesses and political costs, and improve democratic quality in Indonesia's regional elections. This research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of efforts to improve democratic quality through regional elections that are more efficient, transparent, and free from fraud. It also seeks to examine how governance reform and technology adoption can support public participation and strengthen democratic accountability within Indonesia's electoral process. Furthermore, this study focuses on improving electoral governance and political behavior while exploring how technological innovation can be utilized to reduce election costs and support democratic consolidation in post-reformation Indonesia.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Method**

This study uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive approach. This research method aims to produce a systematic, accurate, and factual general description of the facts, characteristics, and relationships between the phenomena being studied (Furidha, 2023). Its focus is to provide a comprehensive summary of an event or experience in the everyday terms used by the people involved (Sandelowski, 2000). For data collection, the author uses a literature study technique to obtain various data from official documents, journal articles, books, relevant news, and various other sources. The data collected is then analyzed using document analysis techniques. Document (and archive)

analysis techniques are one of the qualitative research methods that focus on collecting, examining, and interpreting previously produced materials to answer research questions (Surawy-Stepney et al., 2023).

This research uses an analytical approach. According to Glenn A. Bowen, the document analysis procedure involves three sequential stages of examination. The first stage is skimming, which refers to a rapid and surface-level review conducted to obtain a general understanding of the document's content. This is followed by reading, namely a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the document, and interpretation, which involves analyzing and interpreting the data to generate empirical knowledge (Morgan, 2022). This document analysis is invaluable as a triangulation tool to verify findings from various other data sources (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). This research utilizes data and documents from official government documents, news articles, and specifically, studies from various previous studies, most of which are indexed by Scopus. This diversity assists the author in triangulating and providing a balanced analysis. Findings from various documents and previous research are used to confirm and support the arguments, where the author performs condensation to produce a more meaningful analysis. This method is used by the author to analyze how to optimize election resources through governance aspects and the use of technology. This study will analyze various relevant documents, including research reviewing efficient election practices from various

countries, which can be used as a learning process.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study uses the concept of decentralization as an analytical tool. This concept refers to the transfer of specific functions by the central government—including administrative, political, and economic attributes—to regional or local governments that are independent from the center within a specific geographic and functional domain (Faguet, 2014). This includes the transfer of responsibilities for planning, management, and resource extraction and allocation (Rondinelli et al., 1983). According to Faguet (2014), one of the reasons for the concept of decentralization is to increase accountability and responsiveness, namely that decentralization can make the government more responsible and responsive to the needs of the people by increasing public participation in decision-making. In addition, decentralization can also encourage service efficiency by reducing workloads and communication bottlenecks in the central government and allow projects to be completed more quickly because local managers have the discretion to cut through "red tape" (Rondinelli et al., 1983). This concept is used to help the author analyze how decentralization in the context of general elections can encourage a lighter and more efficient process. This aligns with the original goal of decentralization, which is to increase the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of public services by adapting them to local needs and conditions (Berhanu & Gobie, 2023; Govinda & Bandyopadhyay,

2006). Furthermore, the goal of this concept is to ensure that citizens are truly involved in the democratic process.

This research also uses the concept of digital democracy. Digital democracy refers to a transformational concept in which technology is integrated into the election process to bridge the gap between citizens and the electoral process (Soyipov et al., 2024). The core of this concept is the use of technological advances to encourage higher civic participation, deeper engagement, and greater transparency in the democratic system (Soyipov et al., 2024; Younus et al., 2025). This integration includes the use of online voter registration, smartphone applications, and social media campaigns to mobilize the masses (Soyipov et al., 2024). In addition, Younus et al. (2025) also mention smart elections, which are election processes enhanced by advanced technologies such as electronic voting systems (e-voting), the use of blockchain to ensure the security and integrity of votes, and online platforms that facilitate real-time information exchange. The adoption of such technology should be an alternative in the regional head election process amidst technological advances and efficiency policies. This conceptual framework is expected to assist the author in providing a sharp analysis of the context of technology utilization in regional elections.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Practice of Regional Head Elections in Indonesia and the Discourse on Indirect Elections**

The history of regional head elections (Pilkada) in Indonesia

demonstrates a significant transformation in governance, from a highly centralized system to a decentralized one. Before the reform era, regional heads were determined through an appointment mechanism by the Regional People's Representative Council (DRPR) and ratified by the central government as stipulated in Law Number 5 of 1974. Although the DPRD formally had the authority to elect regional heads, in practice the process was controlled by the central government through bureaucratic mechanisms, military intervention, and control of Golkar as the regime's political vehicle (Aspinall & Fealy, 2003). Following the 1998 Reformasi, decentralization became a key strategy to address the failures of the New Order's centralized system. Law No. 22 of 1999 expanded regional administrative and fiscal authority, although regional heads were still indirectly elected through the DPRD. This system strengthened local oligarchies because political outcomes were heavily influenced by party elites, patronage networks, and transactional politics (Fitriani et al., 2005; Hadiz, 2010).

This situation became a key justification for the enactment of Law No. 32 of 2004, which introduced direct regional elections in Indonesia. As part of political decentralization, direct elections were intended to reduce local elite dominance by shifting political legitimacy from the DPRD to the people, thereby strengthening accountability and increasing leaders' responsiveness to public needs. Several studies provide empirical support for this argument. Faguet (2014) argues that political decentralization combined with electoral accountability can encourage local

governments to be more responsive to public needs. Through political competition and elections, citizens are able to evaluate leaders' performance and impose political consequences on unresponsive policies. In the Indonesian context, Skoufias et al. (2011) found that stronger local electoral accountability was associated with increased budget allocations for education and health, reflecting greater government responsiveness. This finding is consistent with Mónica Martínez-Bravo (2017), who found that directly elected regional leaders are generally more responsive to voter preferences in providing public goods than leaders selected through elite-driven mechanisms.

Since its first implementation in 2005, Pilkada have become one of the most intensive and repeated practices of electoral democracy in Indonesia. The first direct regional elections were held in Kutai Kartanegara Regency on June 1, 2005, marking the beginning of a new phase of post-reform local democracy (Nugraha & Mulyandari, 2016). During the 2005–2014 period, regional elections were held asynchronously, following the end of each regional head's term. This pattern resulted in a very high frequency of elections, both at the provincial, district, and city levels. During this phase, Indonesia recorded more than 1,000 direct regional elections, consisting of 64 provincial elections, 776 district elections, and 187 city elections (Muti'in, 2022). Efforts to organize the election cycle then prompted the government to adopt a policy of simultaneous regional elections starting in 2015. This scheme was implemented in stages through 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2020 simultaneous

regional elections, before reaching its most integrated form in the 2024 National Simultaneous Regional Elections. In 2024, regional elections were held simultaneously in 545 regions covering 37 provinces, 415 districts, and 93 cities, with a total of approximately 200 million registered voters. This scale makes the 2024 National Simultaneous Regional Elections one of the largest single-day simultaneous regional head elections in the world (KPU, 2024; Muhtadi, 2024).

However, the implementation of Pilkada is not free from various challenges. The discourse of indirect regional elections through the DPRD is not an incidental phenomenon, but rather a recurring one in the journey of local democracy in Indonesia. The most explicit debate first occurred in 2014 with the ratification of Law Number 22 of 2014 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors, which normatively returned the mechanism for electing regional heads to the DPRD. The main arguments put forward by supporters of this policy rested on the high political costs of direct regional elections, the rampant practice of money politics, and the increase in horizontal conflict at the local level (Mietzner, 2015). However, Aspinall (2014) shows that the rejection of the 2014 Regional Election Law was not solely driven by technical evaluations of the policy, but rather by a strong public perception that direct regional elections had become an important symbol of post-Reform democratization and political decentralization. Civil society mobilization, academic criticism, and public pressure subsequently led to the issuance of Government Regulation in Lieu of Law (Perppu) Number 1 of 2014,

which was subsequently ratified as Law Number 1 of 2015 and reinstated the direct election mechanism. This response confirmed that the legitimacy of direct regional elections was deeply rooted in public political consciousness, although their practice remains beset by various unresolved structural issues (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Hadiz, 2010).

Interestingly, although the discourse on direct regional elections experienced a strong delegitimization post-2014, particularly following public rejection of Law Number 22 of 2014, similar discourse has resurfaced in the post-2024 Simultaneous National Regional Elections and the beginning of President Prabowo Subianto's administration. Prabowo's statement highlighting direct regional elections as "too expensive" and inefficient has revived long-standing debates about the relevance of elections through the DPRD as a policy alternative (Gitiyarko, 2024). Responding to this discourse, Supratman Andi Agtas, Minister of Law, emphasized that the discourse on indirect elections is worthy of consideration because the constitution does not explicitly limit the regional election mechanism to direct elections, but rather emphasizes democratic principles in regional head elections (Prabowo, 2024). In line with this view, the Chairman of Commission II of the Indonesian House of Representatives, M. Rifqinizamy Karsayuda, stated that the phrase "democratically elected" in Article 18 paragraph (4) of the 1945 Constitution opens room for interpretation, meaning that regional head elections can be conducted through direct or indirect mechanisms, depending on the policies

established by the legislators. He added that because regional elections are not included in the national election regime as stipulated in Article 22E of the 1945 Constitution, regional head elections through the DPRD remain within the constitutional framework and do not conflict with the 1945 Constitution (Parliamentary Reporting Bureau, 2026).

Subsequently, as this discourse gained traction, the stances of political parties in parliament began to become more clearly visible. The Gerindra Party, as the presidential party, openly supports regional head elections through the DPRD, citing the high costs of direct elections. Similar support came from the Golkar Party, which officially recommended an indirect election model in the 2025 National Leadership Meeting (Rapimnas), as well as from the National Awakening Party (PKB), National Mandate Party (PAN), and NasDem. Conversely, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) was the only party in parliament to firmly reject this proposal, viewing elections through the DPRD as a setback for democracy, as it diminishes the people's right to directly elect their leaders. Meanwhile, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) stated that it has not yet taken a final stance and is still gathering public input (Isaac, 2026). This configuration demonstrates that the resurgence of the discourse on indirect regional elections is driven not only by efficiency considerations but also by elite political choices in determining the direction of democracy and decentralization at the local level.

Criticism of discourse on indirect elections has also emerged from the perspective of democracy and

decentralization, which believes that this change has the potential to weaken local democracy and erode people's sovereignty. M. Addi Fauzani, a member of the Center for Constitutional Law Studies (PSHK) at the Islamic University of Indonesia (UII), theoretically demonstrated that the discourse on elections through the DPRD has the potential to ignore the constitutional mandate and the principle of direct, general, free, secret, honest, and fair elections (Luber Jurdil) as stipulated in Article 22E of the 1945 Constitution (Wawan S, 2024). Political observers and academics from the State University of Jakarta and Lingkar Madani also believe that returning regional elections through the DPRD has the potential to reverse the practice of local democracy and revoke the essence of popular sovereignty, which has been firmly attached to direct elections since the reform era (Zahra, 2026). In response, a survey conducted by Litbang Kompas revealed a strong public preference for direct regional elections (Pilkada). 85.1% of respondents supported direct elections at the district/city level and 83.5% at the provincial level, while only a minority approved elections through the DPRD (Harbowo & Rahayu, 2025). Another survey conducted by the Indonesian Survey Circle (LSI) showed similar findings, with most respondents across political preferences rejecting the idea of indirect regional elections. This rejection was recorded at 67.1% among Prabowo Subianto voters, 60.9% among Anies Baswedan voters, and 77.5% among Ganjar Pranowo voters (Rizaldi, 2026).

From the basic concept of decentralization, the discourse on indirect

regional elections through the DPRD reflects the tension between two often-conflicting goals: government efficiency and deepening democracy. In classical literature, decentralization encompasses not only the delegation of administrative and fiscal authority to regions, but also the transfer of planning, decision-making, and public management responsibilities from central to local government—thereby expanding space for citizen participation in local governance (Rondinelli, 1981). In contemporary literature, decentralization is also associated with increased accountability and responsiveness of local governments to citizens through mechanisms of competition and political control (Faguet, 2014). Therefore, the mechanism for electing regional heads holds a very strategic position because it determines the source of political legitimacy of regional heads, whether it comes directly from citizens as voters or from political elites as intermediaries for representation. This tension between the goals of democratization and demands for efficiency has become the main basis for the emergence of critical arguments highlighting the high costs of direct regional elections and the various problems that accompany them.

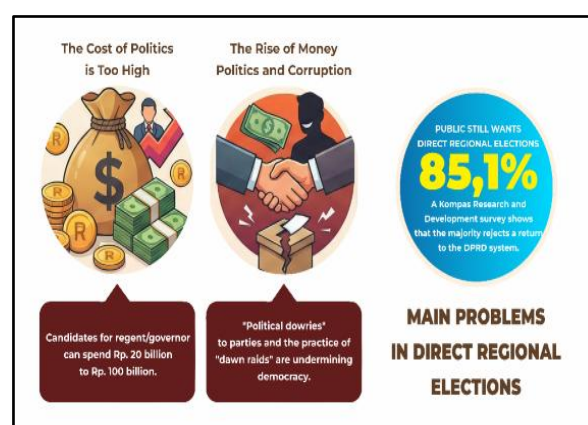
### **The High Cost of Politics and Problems that Often Arise in Regional Elections**

Direct regional elections were introduced to strengthen local democracy by enabling citizens to directly elect regional leaders and promote transparent, accountable governance. However, in practice, the process is often dominated by oligarchic groups and high political costs, limiting competition to

financially powerful candidates. In addition, the implementation of direct elections imposes substantial state expenditures, particularly for single-use election consumables such as ballot papers, envelopes, ink, and administrative materials. On the other hand, regional elections also face the challenge of political costs, which are a major burden for candidates. High campaign costs encourage candidates to seek alternative funding sources, including through local oligarchic networks (Noor et al., 2021). The dominance of economic and political elites shifts the characteristics of regional elections from a democratic mechanism to an oligarchic political practice (Rohmah et al., 2024). In this context, oligarchy can be understood as a system in which power is concentrated in the hands of a handful of individuals with abundant material resources and who exploit their positions for personal and group gain (Winters, 2011). The regional head nomination process, which should be based on an assessment of the candidate's capacity and integrity, is now influenced by their financial capabilities, particularly in the nomination process through political parties.

The implementation of regional elections in Indonesia is frequently associated with high political costs, beginning from the nomination stage to campaigns and vote security. These costs are closely linked to practices of money politics and corruption, particularly through the payment of political dowries to political parties in exchange for nomination support. As a result, candidates often rely on personal funds and external donors to finance expensive

campaign activities, including advertising, logistics, and transportation (Noor et al., 2021). Candidates often address this by establishing relationships with businesspeople or parties with access to substantial resources to cover any funding shortfalls. However, in practice, this often triggers "reciprocal" actions if the candidate wins. Donor contributions typically come without a motive. They expect compensation or future benefits. This often leaves candidates feeling indebted to the donors, potentially leading to corruption or exploiting their positions for personal or group interests.



**Figure 1.** Main Problems in Direct Regional Elections  
**Source:** Processed by author from various sources

The high cost of politics is not only caused by the large political dowries, but also triggered by various other factors, such as campaign costs, which are a major burden for candidates. Research found that high campaign costs make the democratic process in Indonesia increasingly vulnerable (Andriansyah, 2022). This makes candidates highly dependent on money, giving elite groups or those with financial resources the opportunity to influence the political process, including determining who can nominate themselves as candidates. High

campaign costs also trigger vote-buying practices. Candidates or political parties pay voters to gain support. This is a difficult challenge for the Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) to overcome because high campaign costs allow candidates to conceal their funds. Essentially, the amount of campaign costs should be strictly regulated through regulations covering funding sources, contribution limits, recording and reporting of campaign funds, and limitations on campaign spending. However, in practice, numerous loopholes remain in the Election Law, making campaign finance reports difficult for the public to access, coupled with non-transparent donor identities and campaign expenditures that often exceed official reports (ICW, 2022).

In rural areas, the high cost of politics directly shapes voter behavior, inclining people toward candidates who offer tangible benefits—cash or necessities—and thereby creating fertile ground for money politics. Practices such as "dawn raids" and material handouts remain widespread in Indonesia as strategies to secure voter support. Beyond influencing individual choices, this dynamic undermines democratic quality by eroding political rationality (Istianah et al., 2025). The democratic process, which should be based on the candidate's vision and mission, has become an election based on short-term material rewards. People choose candidates not solely because they believe in the candidate's vision, mission, or programs, but because of the direct rewards they can enjoy.

The practice of money politics also arises from a weak election oversight

system and the lack of enforcement of sanctions for violations. In Indonesia, there are still many regional election violations, both administrative and criminal, that are not handled effectively by the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the police. All findings and recommendations regarding violations identified by the Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu) are submitted to the KPU and the police for follow-up. However, there are allegations that not all recommendations issued by Bawaslu are followed up by KPU and its staff. One reason is the ad hoc nature of Bawaslu, which lacks sufficient authority to provide encouragement or pressure on the KPU to enforce sanctions for violations. This reflects the KPU's tendency to frequently ignore Bawaslu recommendations in handling alleged violations of the code of ethics and administrative violations, demonstrating Bawaslu's weak authority (Riwanti et al., 2021; Seac, 2018). This is further exacerbated by Bawaslu's limited access to resources, the complexity of proving money politics cases because they are often conducted covertly, and obstacles to coordination with the police and prosecutors regarding evidence of money politics (Ahmad et al., 2025).

In addition to the high cost of politics, direct regional elections also have the potential to cause social divisions at the local level. Fierce competition between candidates often creates tension in society, often known as political polarization. In this context, society is divided into two opposing groups with differing political views. This political polarization impacts social life and undermines public credibility.

Several factors trigger political polarization, one of which is differences in vision and mission between candidates. Research by Lismita and Putra (2024) identified that differences in public views and choices often arise from evaluations of candidates' visions and missions, mindsets, and how candidates interact with the public. Furthermore, research by Bahri et al. (2025) shows that these differences can also be exacerbated by familial ties between candidates. This has led to the emergence of conflicting support groups, increasing the risk of post-election social divisions at the local level.

### **Enhancing Regional Election Governance and Technology Adoption**

It is undeniable that regional elections are inseparable from various problems. However, among these issues, at least two major ones are related to the implementation of regional elections: the high cost of politics and social divisions. Regional elections in Indonesia are known to require astronomical costs, often disproportionate to the official income of regional heads (Agustino et al., 2023). Several studies have identified the reasons for the high cost of politics in Indonesia. Efendi et al. (2022) found that one of the main causes of high costs is oligarchic control over political parties. The closed and non-transparent candidate selection system often gives rise to the reality of "political dowries," where candidates must pay a sum of money to parties in exchange for a recommendation for candidacy (Efendi et al., 2022; Ikhsan et al., 2024; Misran et al., 2021). This highlights that the high cost of politics stems not from the system itself,

but from political practices that must be reformed.

One step that can be taken is to implement meritocracy in candidate selection. Meritocracy is a social system in which a person's advancement or position in society is based on individual ability and merit, rather than family background, wealth, or social status (Kim & Choi, 2017). There are at least two fundamental features of meritocracy: impartial competition and equality of opportunity (Kim & Choi, 2017; Lipsey, 2014; Martin et al., 2014; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2018). Without equal opportunity for every member of society, regardless of gender, race, or economic class, meritocracy will not achieve its ideal goals (Kim & Choi, 2017). This issue is reflected in Indonesia's regional elections, where candidate selection is often driven by political dowries rather than competence. As a result, political costs increase while the quality of leadership declines. Therefore, strengthening meritocratic recruitment within political parties should become a key priority in party governance reform.

Another factor contributing to the high cost of politics is money politics. Money politics refers to transactional practices such as vote-buying, a common phenomenon in which candidates offer cash, goods, or services to voters in exchange for their votes (Komarudin et al., 2025; Misran et al., 2021). In fact, research by Komarudin et al. (2025) found that money politics contributed up to 69.25% of the influence on voter behavior in some regions, surpassing ideological or sociological factors. According to data from the Ministry of Home Affairs' Research and Development Agency and

observers, the average political cost of running for regent or mayor reaches Rp 20 billion to Rp 30 billion, while running for governor can reach Rp 20 billion to Rp 100 billion (Efendi et al., 2022; Mukhlis et al., 2024). In fact, the research also indicates that these figures far exceed the average official wealth of candidate pairs (Efendi et al., 2022). This information confirms the high cost of politics in Indonesia. In some regions, there are cultural expectations among the public for material assistance from candidates, as well as the use of figures perceived to possess spiritual abilities, which also require material sacrifice (Efendi et al., 2022; Komarudin et al., 2025). These habits ultimately perpetuate money politics in Indonesia. As long as these habits remain unchanged, the cost of politics in Indonesia will continue to increase. To address this problem, structured behavioral changes must be implemented from the top down. This means eliminating behaviors related to money politics, starting with the behavior of political actors, and providing ideal political education for the public.

At the political party level, cadres must be trained in ethical and substantial political communication skills to offer solutions to societal problems, rather than using unconventional campaign techniques that trigger conflict. This also includes strengthening political communication literacy so that messages conveyed do not offend the sensitivities of other groups (Danugroho, 2024). In candidate recruitment, political parties can adopt deliberative democracy, which emphasizes public participation and collective decision-making through rational debate (Pernaa, 2017; Willis et al.,

2022). This approach prioritizes deliberation by citizens rather than elite-driven selection processes. In the context of cadre recruitment, community involvement is expected to align with the criteria of the candidate desired by the community. This relates to aspirations and how the leader can accommodate the interests of the community, not the interests of the party. A party that involves public deliberation in its candidate selection has the potential to garner a larger share of the vote. This is because deliberation facilitates what is known as recursive representation, whereby an ongoing two-way dialogue occurs between politicians and citizens (Willis et al., 2022). This allows candidates to gain a deeper understanding of the solutions most needed by the public and their priorities.

In the context of funding, cadres must be able to offer ideas, not money, to influence voters. Meanwhile, good political education practices aim to equip the public with the knowledge, values, and skills necessary to participate effectively and responsibly in a democratic system (Al-Ansari et al., 2025; Lombreno et al., 2025). Political education even needs to be integrated into the educational curriculum, although in Indonesia this has been implemented from elementary school to higher education. According to Lombreno et al. (2025), Civic and Political Education in schools serves to equip the younger generation with a deep understanding of the rights, obligations, and workings of political institutions. Furthermore, Suneki et al. (2021) argue that using media such as religious studies or sermons involving local community

leaders to convey inclusive political messages can be an alternative. Furthermore, recruiting citizens from various backgrounds (families, communities, people with disabilities, first-time voters) to become agents of change is considered to increase voter participation in their neighborhoods (Suneki et al., 2021). A top-down approach can provide holistic improvements to the quality of democracy in Indonesia.

The implementation of regional elections contributes to high political costs in Indonesia, particularly due to the separation between national and local election schedules, which creates fiscal inefficiency. Significant funds are required for campaigns, logistics, and overlapping supervision, while Indonesia's vast geography further increases logistical expenses to ensure inclusive political participation (Arifin et al., 2025). This demonstrates that the implementation of regional elections in Indonesia faces significant challenges, both materially and physically. However, this does not justify holding elections without direct public participation.

One option is to use reusable election logistics managed by local authorities, while integrating technology into regional elections can further reduce operational, procurement, and human resource costs through a more efficient election system (Arifin et al., 2025). Research by Micheni & Murumba (2018) found that the use of electronic voting systems (e-voting) has the potential to accelerate, simplify, and reduce election costs compared to manual methods that require extensive paperwork and labor. This can be supported using blockchain

technology, where implementing blockchain in e-voting systems is more cost-effective because it can reduce the need for large physical infrastructure, massive manual labor, and expensive audit fees (Chafiq et al., 2024). Furthermore, this technology ensures permanent and transparent data security, which in turn increases public trust without requiring high manual oversight costs (Arifin et al., 2025; Chafiq et al., 2024). The application of technology in regional elections is a manifestation of digital democracy that should be considered, especially with the aim of reducing election costs.

Furthermore, the adoption of technology is not limited to e-voting systems; it can also assist in post-election processes, such as vote counting and dispute resolution. The use of technology in vote counting and tabulation (such as *Situng*) allows for faster and more accurate official results immediately after voting concludes, mitigating the risk of human error and data manipulation that often occur in manual processes (Arifin et al., 2025; Micheni & Murumba, 2018). Furthermore, ICT-based systems provide a rich and unmanageable audit trail, making it easier to verify that results truly reflect the will of the people without the cost of significant investigations. This differs from manual voting, which has a weak audit trail (Micheni & Murumba, 2018). Adopting technology in regional elections, in this context, can facilitate a more accurate and accountable dispute resolution process. This is because digital footprints can be traced, making any irregularities easier to identify. This contrasts with manual techniques, where evidence can easily be removed.

Despite its advantages, the use of technology in regional elections still presents challenges and limitations in its implementation. Soyipov et al. (2024) identified key challenges in digital democracy relevant in this context, including digital literacy, cybersecurity, the digital divide, and misinformation. The first challenge relates to digital literacy, where the gap in digital platform usage, particularly among the elderly and low-income populations, remains a persistent problem (Soyipov et al., 2024). In the context of regional elections, this is a common occurrence. This fact is supported by data released by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), which found a striking difference in internet penetration rates between generations. Pre-Boomers (born <1945) only had a penetration rate of 20.88%, while Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) had a penetration rate of 59.40%. This indicates that older age groups still face significant barriers in adopting and understanding digital technology (APJII, 2025). In other words, this mechanism becomes less relevant when applied to the elderly. Although assistance is available, it has the potential to violate election principles, particularly regarding "confidentiality."

This situation is exacerbated by geographical challenges that make it difficult for technology to reach these regions. This is related to the digital divide, namely unequal access to technological infrastructure (such as fast internet) in rural or underdeveloped areas (Soyipov et al., 2024). There are significant differences between western and eastern Indonesia. Java Island has the highest penetration rate at 84.69%, while

Maluku and Papua have the lowest penetration rate at 69.26%. Other regions, such as Sulawesi, also remain at 71.64% (APJII, 2025). Furthermore, although the penetration rate in "Disadvantaged Regions" is recorded at 80.55%, their user contribution to the national aggregate total is very small, at only 1.91%. In contrast, 98.09% of user contributions come from "Non-Disadvantaged Regions." In fact, internet penetration in urban areas reached 82.73%, higher than in rural areas, which stood at 78.57% (APJII, 2025). This data presents a challenge for stakeholders if they want to adopt an inclusive e-voting system for regional elections. Such a system is only possible in regions with high digital literacy and adequate technological infrastructure.

Furthermore, another threat comes from cyberattacks against voter data and the integrity of online voting systems. Election systems remain vulnerable to

cyberattacks aimed at stealing voter data or compromising the integrity of voting results (Soyipov et al., 2024). Hackers can attempt to break into the system to change votes or insert false results during data transmission (Micheni & Murumba, 2018). An example occurred in Ukraine in 2014, where attackers deleted key files from the election commission's vote-counting computer just before the election, forcing officials to rely on backup data (Okwueze, 2022). Another example is that threats target not only the voting system itself but also additional systems such as voter registration websites and results management systems (RMS), as seen in infiltration attempts by foreign actors from Russia and Iran in the United States

(Duenas-Cid et al., 2024). The threats can even be highly personal, with attackers stealing voters' identities to cast illegal votes (Sahib & Al-Shamery, 2021). The use of single-factor authentication (such as passwords alone) is considered very weak and easily manipulated (Ahmadih & Madhoun, 2024). These cases provide lessons for Indonesia to increase budget allocation for research and development (R&D) to develop robust systems for elections, both at the regional and national levels. This is due to the vulnerability of technology in regional elections, but on the other hand, the use of technology can reduce logistical costs, thereby easing the country's fiscal burden.

**Table 1.** Enhancing Regional Election Governance

| No | Problems and Challenges                           | Enhancement                                      |
|----|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1  | Money Politics and Political Dowries              | Meritocracy to eliminate the political dowries   |
| 2  | Low political literacy                            | Political Education                              |
| 3  | High cost on regional elections logistics         | Technology adoption: blockchain, e-voting system |
| 4  | Cyber treat on election system                    | Improvement in R&D                               |
| 5  | Limitation on technology-based dispute settlement | Judicial Activism                                |

**Source:** Processed by author from various sources

In terms of dispute resolution, many scholars are currently promoting judicial activism. This activism allows the Constitutional Court (MK) to go beyond its narrow authority to count vote margins and begin examining process violations that affect election integrity,

shifting the Constitutional Court's paradigm from a calculator court to one of substantive justice (Amiruddin & Ramadani, 2023). In the context of technology use, courts can act as guardians of democratic values (Mochtar, 2025), particularly in this context when election technology systems are deemed to have failed or not met transparency standards. Judicial activism globally is also evident in the rejection of technology deemed insecure or not auditable by the public (Blanchard & Selker, 2018). In 2009, the German Constitutional Court declared the use of electronic voting machines (NEDAP) unconstitutional, with judges arguing that the technology prevented citizens from verifying the counting process without specialized technical knowledge, thus violating the principle of public transparency in democracy (Kravchuk, 2021). The frequent use of technology that ignores context can at least be addressed through judicial activism. The coexistence of the two can improve the quality of democracy.

Future judicial activism will undoubtedly be confronted with the use of technology in regional elections, such as blockchain. Therefore, courts must ensure that the integration of these digital tools maintains anonymity, integrity, and verifiability without creating digital inequality for marginalized groups (Chafiq et al., 2024; Younus et al., 2025). In general, Mochtar (2025) argues that, on the one hand, judicial activism strengthens the democratic process by correcting unresolved violations at the grassroots level. However, on the other hand, it risks creating legal uncertainty and potential abuse of authority, as the

Constitutional Court acts as a "positive legislator" that exceeds constitutionally established institutional boundaries (Amiruddin & Ramadani, 2023; Mochtar, 2025; Younus et al., 2025). This means that the presence of judicial activism can encourage judges to incorporate more humanistic variables into their decisions. However, judges must also understand constitutional limitations. Therefore, judicial selection is an indispensable factor in improving the quality of democracy.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research shows that the discourse on returning the regional election mechanism to the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) is not a substantive solution to the problem of election governance but rather risks shifting the issue of high costs and political transaction practices from a relatively open arena to a more closed decision-making space. Within a decentralized framework, direct regional elections remain relevant because they maintain the political legitimacy of regional heads among the people while strengthening vertical accountability. The research findings confirm that the main problems of regional elections, such as high political costs, the practice of money politics, oligarchic dominance in the candidacy process, and weak transparency and law enforcement, are fundamentally structural and institutional problems rather than merely consequences of direct electoral mechanisms.

Therefore, efforts to improve the quality of local democracy should focus on strengthening electoral governance

through merit-based candidate recruitment, political funding accountability, political education, and broader public oversight. In addition, this study highlights that technology adoption in regional elections, including the digitization of electoral administration, vote recapitulation systems, and potential e-voting mechanisms, can contribute to greater efficiency, transparency, and accountability when supported by adequate institutional readiness and mitigation of cybersecurity risks and the digital divide. In this regard, the study contributes theoretically to the broader discourse on digital democracy and decentralization studies in Indonesia by demonstrating that technological innovation should not be viewed merely as a technical instrument of electoral administration, but as part of an integrated democratic governance framework that interacts with political institutions, judicial oversight, and public participation. Furthermore, this research emphasizes that improving democratic quality in regional elections requires an interconnected approach that combines governance reform, technology adoption, and institutional accountability rather than relying solely on changes in electoral mechanisms. Future studies are recommended to empirically examine the long-term impact of election technology on political costs, voter participation, electoral integrity, and public trust, as well as to compare the effectiveness of different regional election governance models across diverse social, economic, and geographical contexts in Indonesia.

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