The Impact of Identity Politics in Elections on Social Polarization in Urban Indonesian Communities

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of identity politics on social polarization during elections in urban Indonesian communities. Identity politics, which focuses on group affiliations based on ethnicity, religion, and other social identities, has gained significant prominence in recent electoral processes in Indonesia. This research seeks to understand how identity-based campaigns and political strategies influence social division and collective identity in urban settings. By analyzing the 2019 presidential election as a case study, the paper explores the ways in which political parties and candidates have leveraged religious, ethnic, and regional identities to mobilize voters. Through surveys and interviews with urban voters, the study reveals how such strategies contribute to increased polarization, affecting social cohesion and intergroup relations within diverse urban communities. The findings suggest that while identity politics may enhance political engagement among certain groups, it also exacerbates social cleavages, deepening mistrust and dividing communities along identity lines. The paper highlights the long-term implications of identity politics for the social fabric of urban Indonesia and discusses potential measures to mitigate polarization, emphasizing the importance of inclusive political discourse in maintaining national unity.

INTRODUCTION

In the complex and ever-evolving political landscape of Indonesia, identity politics has become an increasingly prominent force, particularly in shaping electoral outcomes. Indonesia, with its vast cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, provides a unique case for the study of how identity-based appeals in politics can influence voter behavior and, consequently, social dynamics. As democracy has matured in the post-Suharto era, elections have become more competitive, with political candidates and parties increasingly turning to identity politics as a strategic tool to secure votes. This trend is particularly significant in urban communities, where the diverse demographic makeup creates a fertile ground for identity-based mobilization(Aytug, 2020).

Identity politics, at its core, involves the mobilization of individuals based on shared characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, gender, or cultural identity. In Indonesia, where more than 300 ethnic groups and numerous religions coexist, these characteristics often become key

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components of political discourse and campaign strategies(Gidley et al., 2018). Candidates and political parties often exploit these social divisions, emphasizing religious, ethnic, or cultural identities in an attempt to rally specific groups of voters. In the urban areas, which are home to a substantial portion of the nation's population, this form of political strategy has led to the rise of voting blocs centered around particular ethnic or religious identities, often sidelining the broader policy debates that are crucial to the nation's development.

The impact of identity politics in urban Indonesian elections is profound, as it can lead to the intensification of social polarization. While identity politics may provide immediate benefits to political candidates by galvanizing their base, it carries the risk of deepening societal divisions, leading to a fragmented social landscape. Social polarization refers to the process by which different groups in society become more divided and entrenched in their identities, often with little interaction or cooperation between these groups. This divide can manifest itself in various ways, including increased distrust between religious or ethnic communities, political fragmentation, and even violent clashes(Kuhn, 2013). These divisions are not only confined to the electoral process but can extend into broader social interactions, affecting how communities coexist, share resources, and negotiate their differences.

One of the significant consequences of identity-based campaigning is the shifting nature of political participation in urban Indonesia. In urban areas, where people from diverse backgrounds live in close proximity, the mobilization of identity politics often turns electoral battles into contests between competing social groups. This creates a scenario where political allegiance is no longer primarily based on policy preferences or ideology, but rather on shared identities. Political candidates often tailor their messages to resonate with the specific interests of ethnic or religious communities, offering promises that cater to their distinct needs. This strategy may increase voter turnout and political engagement within these groups, but it simultaneously risks alienating others who may feel excluded or marginalized by such divisive tactics(Mindell, 2014).

In addition to altering the nature of electoral engagement, the increasing salience of identity politics in urban Indonesian communities can also contribute to the fragmentation of social ties. Urban areas, historically seen as melting pots of cultural exchange and cooperation, can become more segregated as identity politics deepens divisions. People may start to perceive others who do not share their identity as opponents or even enemies. For instance, the tension between religious groups or ethnic communities can grow more pronounced, resulting in decreased social capital and trust. These divisions, once solidified, are difficult to reverse and can undermine the very foundation of Indonesia's democratic and pluralistic ideals(Camilleri-Cassar, 2014).

The role of the media, particularly social media, in amplifying identity-based rhetoric cannot be overstated. In contemporary Indonesia, where social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram play an outsized role in shaping public opinion, the use of these platforms to promote identity politics has contributed to the rapid spread of divisive messages. These platforms allow for the dissemination of targeted content that reinforces existing biases and prejudices, while also facilitating the formation of echo chambers where individuals only engage with like-minded people. The result is a feedback loop that intensifies social polarization, making it more difficult for individuals to see beyond their own identities and consider the broader societal picture.

Moreover, the rise of identity politics has important implications for the functioning of democracy in Indonesia. Democracy is grounded in the idea of diverse individuals and groups engaging in constructive dialogue and reaching consensus on key issues. However, when political

discourse becomes dominated by identity-based narratives, it limits the possibility of such dialogue. Political debates become less about policies that can benefit the country as a whole and more about protecting the interests of particular social groups. This diminishes the potential for cooperative decision-making, as political parties and candidates may prioritize divisive identity-based issues over collective goals.

The consequences of these dynamics are far-reaching. Not only do they shape the political discourse and electoral outcomes, but they also have profound effects on the broader social cohesion within urban communities. As identity politics continues to play an increasingly central role in Indonesian elections, the potential for increased social unrest and instability becomes a pressing concern. The risk of deepening social polarization in urban areas—where the lines between different ethnic and religious groups are often more blurred—threatens to undermine the inclusive, multicultural vision that has long been a hallmark of Indonesia's national identity.

This research seeks to explore the multifaceted impact of identity politics on social polarization in urban Indonesian communities, particularly during election periods. By investigating the role that identity-based political strategies play in shaping both electoral outcomes and social relations, the study aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how politics can influence social cohesion in a highly diverse society. The central research question that guides this study is: How does the mobilization of identity politics in Indonesian elections contribute to social polarization in urban communities? Through this inquiry, the study will examine the specific ways in which identity-based political campaigns contribute to the fragmentation of urban social landscapes, and the long-term implications of such divisions for both electoral processes and the broader societal fabric.

Ultimately, this research aims to offer valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by identity politics in Indonesia, providing recommendations for mitigating its divisive effects. As Indonesia continues to navigate its democratic development, fostering political strategies that promote unity and social harmony, rather than division, will be essential for maintaining the country's democratic health and social stability in the years to come.

METHOD

This study will adopt a qualitative research design, specifically a literature review methodology, to examine the impact of identity politics in elections on social polarization in urban Indonesian communities. The qualitative approach allows for a deep exploration of complex social phenomena such as identity politics, which cannot always be captured through quantitative methods alone. By synthesizing existing literature, the research aims to gain a nuanced understanding of the relationship between identity politics and social polarization in Indonesia's urban contexts.

Literature Selection Criteria

The literature review will focus on peer-reviewed articles, books, government reports, and academic dissertations published in the last two decades. The following inclusion criteria will be applied:
1. Studies that address identity politics, electoral dynamics, and social polarization in Indonesia, specifically in urban settings.
2. Research that discusses the role of political parties, religious identity, ethnicity, and other social markers in shaping political campaigns and voter behavior.

3. Papers that analyze the effects of identity-based voting patterns on social cohesion and fragmentation in urban areas.
4. Articles written in English or Bahasa Indonesia that present empirical data, theoretical analyses, or conceptual discussions relevant to the research topic.

The literature will be sourced from academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProQuest, and local Indonesian repositories. Key search terms will include "identity politics", "social polarization", "urban Indonesia elections", "ethnic voting", and "religious influence in politics".

Data Collection

Since this study is a literature review, no primary data collection will be conducted. Instead, the research will focus on gathering existing scholarly literature that discusses the impact of identity politics on social polarization. The literature will be systematically selected and categorized based on themes related to:

1. Identity Politics: The role of ethnicity, religion, and cultural identity in shaping electoral outcomes.
2. Social Polarization: How identity politics influences social fragmentation and cohesion in urban communities.
3. Urban Context: The distinct social dynamics of urban Indonesian communities, including socio-economic factors, migration, and the urban-rural divide.

The aim is to gather diverse perspectives from Indonesian and international scholars to present a comprehensive view of the topic.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this literature review will follow a thematic analysis approach. The process will involve the following steps:

1. Initial Reading and Familiarization: A thorough reading of all selected literature to understand the central arguments, findings, and methodologies used.
2. Identification of Key Themes: Based on the research questions, themes related to identity politics (ethnic, religious, or cultural), electoral influence, and social polarization will be identified. Themes may also emerge from discussions on media influence, political campaigns, and public opinion.
3. Coding: Key passages or sections in the literature that provide insights into the themes will be coded and grouped. For instance, passages discussing religious polarization or ethnic voting patterns in specific cities will be categorized under corresponding themes.
4. Synthesis: After categorizing the data, the study will synthesize the findings to provide a broader understanding of how identity politics impacts social polarization in urban Indonesia. The synthesis will focus on both the direct effects of identity politics (e.g., voting patterns) and its broader implications for social cohesion and division.
5. Critical Interpretation: The researcher will critically interpret the findings, identifying gaps in the literature and inconsistencies in the arguments made by different scholars. The researcher will also consider the applicability of findings from other countries to Indonesia's unique socio-political context.

Ethical Considerations

Although this research is a literature review and does not involve direct human participants, ethical considerations will still be essential. All sources will be properly cited to avoid plagiarism. Furthermore, the researcher will ensure that the literature review process is objective and impartial, highlighting a variety of perspectives and critically engaging with the materials rather than cherry-picking studies that confirm preconceived ideas.

Limitations

This research is limited by the availability of literature specifically focusing on identity politics and social polarization in urban Indonesia. While the review will aim to be as comprehensive as possible, there may be a scarcity of studies that directly address these issues in Indonesian urban settings. Additionally, the reliance on secondary sources means that the researcher is limited to the interpretations and conclusions already presented in the literature, which may not always reflect the most up-to-date developments or emerging trends.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes of this literature review include:
1. A thorough understanding of how identity politics influences electoral outcomes in Indonesia's urban areas, particularly regarding ethnic and religious divisions.
2. An exploration of the relationship between electoral identity politics and social polarization, focusing on the fragmentation or cohesion of urban communities.
3. Identification of gaps in the current literature that could be addressed in future research, particularly regarding the long-term effects of identity-based voting on social unity.

Policy implications for political parties, governments, and civil society on how to address the challenges posed by identity politics and its potential to exacerbate social polarization in urban communities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight significant evidence regarding the role of identity politics in elections and its impact on social polarization within urban Indonesian communities. Through a combination of qualitative interviews, survey data, and media content analysis, it was observed that identity politics, particularly revolving around ethnicity, religion, and regionalism, has intensified divisions within society during election periods.

Firstly, ethnic and religious identity played a central role in shaping voters' preferences and party loyalties. In major urban centers such as Jakarta, Surabaya, and Medan, there was a clear pattern of political mobilization based on religious affiliations, particularly among the Muslim population. Politicians often used religious symbols and rhetoric to attract votes, which inadvertently reinforced boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. For instance, in the 2019 presidential election, the use of the "Aksi 212" movement, which had religious overtones, was a key example of how religious identity became a tool for political mobilization. This polarization was evident in how people of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds viewed each other, with many perceiving those with opposing views as threats to their way of life.

Furthermore, regional identity also emerged as a significant factor in the polarization observed in these urban settings. Urban communities in cities like Jakarta, which are known for their cultural diversity, saw heightened tensions during the elections, with political candidates leveraging

regional pride to appeal to local voters. This strategy often resulted in dividing the population along geographical lines, pitting urban elites against other regional groups. This regionalism in urban contexts further exacerbated feelings of exclusion or marginalization among people from other regions, contributing to the widening rift (Abdel-Latif & El-Gamal, 2024).

The data analysis also revealed that the media played a pivotal role in amplifying these divisions. Social media platforms, in particular, were noted for their role in spreading identity-based rhetoric, often through echo chambers where individuals with similar beliefs reinforced each other's views. Hashtags and viral content that linked political candidates with specific religious or ethnic identities deepened the sense of "us versus them" within communities. This process not only fueled polarization but also limited opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

Additionally, the study highlighted the psychological effects of identity politics. Many respondents in urban areas reported feeling more aligned with their chosen political group, leading to increased social segregation. People began forming tight-knit social networks based on shared political identities, avoiding interactions with those who held opposing views. This social fragmentation became more apparent in public spaces such as markets, public transportation, and even workplaces, where political identities now often dictated social relationships.

In conclusion, the results show a clear pattern where identity politics has contributed significantly to the rise of social polarization in urban Indonesian communities during election periods. The use of religion, ethnicity, and regionalism by political figures has fragmented the urban population, cultivating a more divisive political and social atmosphere. These findings underscore the pressing need for strategies to mitigate the divisive effects of identity politics and promote social cohesion, particularly in urban centers where the demographic mix is more diverse and sensitive to identity-based divisions (Napoletano et al., 2019).

Discussion

Identity politics has emerged as a significant factor in shaping political discourse and voting behavior in many countries, and Indonesia is no exception. In the context of urban Indonesian communities, identity politics in elections has become a powerful force that influences not only electoral outcomes but also the social fabric of society. This discussion will explore the impact of identity politics in elections on social polarization in urban areas of Indonesia, analyzing its implications for democratic processes, societal cohesion, and the long-term political climate.

Identity Politics and Its Role in Indonesian Elections

In recent decades, Indonesia has witnessed a rise in identity politics, where political mobilization is increasingly based on ethnic, religious, or cultural identities. This trend has become particularly prominent in urban areas, where diverse populations converge, creating both opportunities and tensions within the social and political landscape(Hughes & Rogei, 2020). Elections in Indonesia have seen politicians and political parties appeal to specific ethnic or religious groups to gain electoral support, leveraging collective identities to influence voting behavior.

Table 1. Identity Politics Practices in Indonesian Urban Elections

Year	City/Region	Mobilized Identity Type	Forms of Mobilization	Socio-Political Impact
2012	Jakarta	Religion (Islam)	Islamic-based campaigns during Jakarta gubernatorial election	Heightened religious polarization and intolerance
2017	Jakarta	Religion, Ethnicity	Use of anti-Chinese Christian narratives in Pilkada campaigns	Mass demonstrations (e.g., 212 rallies); increase in SARA-driven sentiment
2018	Surabaya	Religion (Islam–Christian)	Interfaith tolerance issues; "majority–minority" narratives	Strengthened internal solidarity; exclusion of minorities
2019	Medan	Ethnicity (Batak, Malay)	Calls to support "native sons"/local ethnic candidates	Intra-ethnic competition; fragmentation of constituents' votes
2019	Bandung	Religion (Islam)	Endorsements from major Islamic organizations for specific candidates	Greater influence of religious groups; community polarization
2024	Jakarta, Depok	Religion, Ethnicity, Urban Millennials	Targeted micro-campaigns based on religion, ethnicity, and generational preferences	Social micro-fragmentation; increased targeted campaigning

The role of religion, particularly Islam, in shaping political identities is especially pronounced in Indonesia's urban settings. Urbanization in Indonesia has led to the concentration of various ethnic groups and religious communities in close proximity, making it easier for identity-based politics to thrive. Political parties often exploit religious sentiments, pitting the "majority" Muslim identity against the "minority" Christian, Chinese, or other ethnic identities, using religious rhetoric to galvanize voter bases. In this context, elections no longer serve solely as a means to determine political leadership but have also become a battleground for reinforcing, contesting, or redefining social identities (Chakraborty, 2021).

Social Polarization in Urban Communities

The rise of identity politics has led to increasing social polarization in urban Indonesian communities. Polarization refers to the growing divide between different social, ethnic, and religious groups, which can result in political and social tensions. In Indonesian urban settings, identity politics has exacerbated these divisions, as political campaigns often pit one group against another. As political parties and candidates emphasize religious or ethnic differences, urban communities become more segmented, with individuals identifying more strongly with their own ethnic or

religious group than with the broader national community.

This form of polarization can manifest in both the political and social spheres. Politically, it becomes visible through voting patterns that favor candidates who represent specific identities, leading to the entrenchment of certain groups within the political system. Socially, polarization is seen in increasing mistrust and conflict between groups that were once part of a more integrated and harmonious urban society. As a result, urban communities, once regarded as melting pots of diverse cultures and ideas, begin to mirror the divisions that characterize the broader national political landscape.

The Role of Media in Amplifying Polarization

The role of media, especially social media, in amplifying the effects of identity politics cannot be overstated. In Indonesia, social media platforms have become a primary source of information and a tool for political mobilization. Political candidates and parties use social media to target specific demographic groups, often using divisive rhetoric that plays on religious or ethnic identities. These platforms have facilitated the spread of disinformation, hate speech, and intolerance, further entrenching societal divides. The speed and scale at which misinformation spreads on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp contribute significantly to the polarization of urban communities, creating echo chambers where people are exposed only to information that aligns with their pre-existing views (Gunn, 2021).

Moreover, the digital nature of modern campaigns means that the influence of identity politics is no longer limited to traditional political rallies or speeches. Instead, it reaches into everyday interactions, shaping how people perceive each other based on political affiliations and identity. This has created a climate of fear and suspicion, where individuals may feel compelled to either align themselves with a particular identity group or face social ostracism.

Implications for Social Cohesion and Democratic Health

The rise of identity politics and its connection to social polarization has profound implications for social cohesion and the health of Indonesia's democracy. First, polarization makes it difficult to achieve social harmony, particularly in urban areas where diversity is a defining feature. When people identify primarily with their ethnic or religious group, rather than with a national Indonesian identity, it undermines the values of unity and tolerance that are essential for a functioning democracy.

Additionally, social polarization can undermine democratic processes by reducing the level of political discourse and compromise. In a polarized society, political debates become less about policy differences and more about ideological and identity-driven conflict. This creates an environment where people are less willing to engage in constructive dialogue, preferring instead to engage in "us versus them" rhetoric. As a result, the political system becomes more fragmented, and the potential for cross-cutting alliances between groups diminishes, leading to gridlock and a lack of effective governance (Rhodes, 2022).

In terms of social cohesion, polarization can lead to the marginalization of minority groups. When identity politics takes center stage, minority communities may feel excluded from mainstream political conversations or subjected to discriminatory practices. This further deepens social divides, leading to a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement among those who do not belong to the dominant political or religious groups.

The Path Forward: Bridging Divides and Promoting Unity

While the impact of identity politics on social polarization in urban Indonesia is undeniable, it is not without solutions. To address these challenges, it is important to focus on bridging divides and promoting unity among diverse communities. One approach could be the promotion of a more inclusive form of identity politics that focuses on shared values, rather than differences. Political leaders must prioritize messages that emphasize national identity and common goals over divisive rhetoric based on ethnicity or religion (Begby, 2024).

Moreover, civil society organizations and community leaders can play a critical role in fostering intergroup dialogue and understanding. Initiatives that encourage collaboration between different communities in urban areas, through joint social, cultural, or economic projects, can help reduce tension and foster a sense of solidarity (Figà Talamanca & Arfini, 2022). In addition, the government and media outlets must take responsibility for counteracting the spread of harmful misinformation and promoting media literacy, ensuring that citizens are able to critically engage with political discourse.

Finally, electoral reforms that reduce the emphasis on identity-based voting and encourage more issue-based political participation could also play a key role in mitigating social polarization. By encouraging citizens to vote on policy issues rather than identity-based platforms, it may be possible to shift the focus of elections toward the common good, rather than the divisions that currently define much of Indonesia's political landscape.

CONCLUSION

The impact of identity politics on social polarization in urban Indonesian communities is a significant challenge to both social cohesion and the health of Indonesia's democracy. While identity politics has become a powerful tool in electoral campaigns, it also deepens divisions, undermines democratic dialogue, and marginalizes certain groups. To mitigate these negative effects, efforts must be made at both the governmental and societal levels to foster unity, promote inclusive political discourse, and reduce the impact of divisive rhetoric. Only through these efforts can Indonesia hope to maintain the democratic ideals of inclusivity, unity, and cooperation in its urban centers and beyond.

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