

The electoral system and political party simplification as a strategy to strengthen presidentialism in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the electoral system and the simplification of political parties as a strategy to strengthen the presidential system in Indonesia. Since the 1999 election until the 2024 election, the application of an open proportional system with a relatively low parliamentary threshold has produced a fragmented parliament in which no single political party has obtained a majority of seats. This condition has forced presidents to form large coalitions that are often pragmatic and politically costly, thereby potentially undermining the effectiveness of governance. Using normative legal research and electoral data from the last two decades, this study identifies that party simplification through increasing the parliamentary threshold, restructuring electoral districts, and strengthening party regulations is a solution to create a simpler, more effective, and more stable party system. With an ideal parliamentary threshold in the range of 8 to 10 percent, the number of parties in parliament could be reduced to five or six, thereby enabling the presidential government to operate more efficiently and stably while maintaining the principle of representation. These findings are expected to contribute to the formulation of electoral reform policies aimed at strengthening presidentialism and the quality of democracy in Indonesia.

Keywords

Electoral System, Political Parties, Presidential System

Introduction

In democratic systems of government, or in states undergoing a process of democratization, political parties function as key instruments of democracy that connect the people with the government. Political parties are not only an integral part of democracy but also derive strong legitimacy from social representation [1]. Democracy emphasizes equality of rights and obligations, as well as equal treatment for all citizens [2]. In modern democracies, representative systems are primarily embodied in political parties, which serve as channels through which the aspirations of society are

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transmitted into government decisions [3]. Accordingly, Indonesia, as a democratic state, has adopted a multiparty system.

A country with a weak or poorly organized party system cannot effectively carry out democratic procedures. Democracy itself is manifested in the existence of political parties that represent the diverse backgrounds of society [4]. Indonesia, which has claimed to be a democratic country since the Reform Era, has established a political system aligned with democratic principles. The first and most visible manifestation is the structuring of political parties participating in elections. Democracy requires a multiparty system to represent a wide range of social interests, and this system is considered capable of realizing democratic ideals in political practice [5].

However, Indonesia's political system after the 1998 Reform experienced fundamental changes, especially through the strengthening of electoral democracy regulated by the Election Law and the Political Party Law. One of the main characteristics of Indonesia's electoral democracy is the presidential system, where the president is directly elected by the people and holds a position separate from parliament. From a constitutional theory perspective, the presidential system will function optimally if supported by a relatively simple party system, ensuring that the relationship between the executive and the legislature is harmonious and effective.

The 1999 general election, the first democratic election after reform, was contested by 48 political parties. The proportional representation system used at that time, without any parliamentary threshold, resulted in the House of Representatives (DPR) being filled with representatives from 21 political parties. None of these parties won a majority of seats. Although the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) received the most votes, governance still required broad-based coalitions in parliament. This fragmentation marked the beginning of Indonesia's political culture of fragile "grand coalitions" [6].

The 2004 election introduced two significant changes. First, the president was directly elected by the people for the first time. Second, the number of participating parties decreased to 24, yet the number of parties represented in parliament remained relatively high due to the absence of a significant parliamentary threshold. Consequently, the resulting parliament was fragmented, forcing the president to rely on coalitions for legislative support [7].

In the 2009 election, the government introduced a 2.5% parliamentary threshold to reduce the number of parties in the DPR. However, nine political parties still won seats, with the Democratic Party securing the most votes but only controlling about 26% of seats [8]. This once again required the formation of large multi-party coalitions.

The 2014 election raised the parliamentary threshold to 3.5%, slightly reducing the number of parties in parliament to ten [9]. However, political polarization remained strong, as reflected in the divide between the "Indonesia Hebat Coalition" and the "Red-and-White Coalition," which complicated legislative decision-making.

In 2019, the threshold was raised further to 4%, and nine parties entered parliament [10]. Although this showed a declining trend, fragmentation persisted, forcing the president to form broad coalitions that blurred opposition roles and intensified transactional politics.

The 2024 election, conducted under an open-list proportional system following the Constitutional Court's rejection of a closed-list system, showed similar patterns. Major parties such as PDI-P, Gerindra, Golkar, and PKB emerged as dominant forces, yet none secured a majority. This confirms a consistent trend of parliamentary fragmentation over the past two decades.

This fragmentation has serious implications for the effectiveness of the presidential system. First, a directly elected president must still build broad coalitions to secure parliamentary support, often through pragmatic, power-sharing arrangements rather than shared policy visions. Second, managing large coalitions complicates coordination and slows legislative processes. Third, the stability expected from presidentialism is undermined by fragile coalition dynamics, granting smaller parties disproportionate influence as “kingmakers.”

Based on this two-decade experience, it is evident that Indonesia requires political reform to strengthen the presidential system. Simplification of political parties is a strategic step to achieve this goal. Party simplification does not mean limiting democracy but rather steering the party system to be more effective in supporting governance. Comparative experience shows that countries with stable presidential traditions typically have two or three major parties competing, allowing the electoral winner to govern with strong legitimacy and without excessive coalition constraints.

Thus, the study of electoral systems, party simplification, and the strengthening of presidentialism is highly relevant in Indonesia today. The experience from 1999 to 2024 demonstrates that political fragmentation remains one of the greatest obstacles to effective governance. Using election data across this period, this study analyzes the design of political party simplification to strengthen Indonesia's presidential system, with a focus on the role of parliamentary thresholds and multiparty dynamics.

Method

This study employs a normative legal research method, which views law as a system of norms and examines doctrines and principles within legal science. The approach combines statutory, conceptual, and comparative perspectives, using secondary data from both primary and secondary legal materials. Data were analyzed qualitatively to interpret and evaluate electoral regulations and party system arrangements in relation to the strengthening of Indonesia's presidential system.

Results and Discussion

The Design of Political Party Simplification in Strengthening the Presidential System

The electoral threshold is a rule that determines the minimum percentage of votes a political party must obtain in order to qualify for seats in the legislature. In Indonesia, this concept is applied in two main forms: the parliamentary threshold and the presidential nomination threshold [11]. The focus of this discussion is the parliamentary threshold, which is directly related to the number of parties represented in parliament and the effectiveness of the presidential system.

The parliamentary threshold was first introduced in Article 202(1) of Law No. 10 of 2008 on the Election of the DPR, DPD, and DPRD, which set a minimum of 2.5% of valid national votes for entry into the DPR. In the 2009 election, this rule limited representation to only nine parties out of 38 participants [12]. However, the effectiveness of the provision was reduced because Article 316(d) of the same law allowed parties that failed to meet the threshold to continue contesting future elections by merging, changing names, or undergoing re-verification. As a result, the total number of parties remained high, and the goal of party simplification was not fully achieved.

This experience led to the revision of the Election Law through Law No. 8 of 2012, which raised the threshold to 3.5%. In the 2014 election, out of 12 national parties (plus 3 local parties in Aceh), 10 parties secured seats in the DPR. Although this represented a slight reduction, political fragmentation remained significant.

Efforts continued with Law No. 7 of 2017, which increased the threshold to 4% of valid national votes. In the 2019 election, nine out of 16 national parties, along with four local Acehese parties, gained representation. While this showed positive results in reducing the number of parties, nine parties were still considered too many for an effective presidential system, where stability ideally requires majority support.

The 2024 election maintained the 4% threshold, with 18 national parties and 6 Acehese local parties participating. Only eight parties managed to enter the DPR [13]. Although this number was lower than in 2019, political fragmentation persisted, forcing the president to build broad coalitions often based on power-sharing rather than common policy visions. Such coalitions tend to weaken governance consistency and blur accountability.

The rationale for party simplification can be understood within the framework of Pancasila. In a multiparty democracy based on free will, freedom must not be exercised selfishly for personal or elite interests. Instead, it must reflect collective welfare and social justice, consistent with the ethical value of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) embedded in Pancasila. Thus, simplifying parties is not about limiting political rights but about aligning political freedom with the greater good of society.

From a constitutional perspective, the presidential system also provides strong justification for the parliamentary threshold. The aim is to reinforce the president's position by reducing the number of parties in parliament, thereby strengthening governance stability. A smaller number of parties also enhances legislative effectiveness, as fewer competing interests reduce the risk of policy deadlock.

From a sociological perspective, the threshold helps discourage short-term and opportunistic party formation. Many political elites establish parties merely as vehicles for parliamentary seats rather than as institutions committed to long-term development. While such elites often resist higher thresholds, parties that prioritize institutional sustainability and public trust tend to support them, viewing thresholds as a mechanism for building credibility and quality.

Comparative experience provides valuable insight. For example, since 1983, Turkey has applied a 10% parliamentary threshold, significantly reducing the number of parties in parliament and creating more stable governments. Although a 10% threshold may be considered too high for Indonesia, potentially reducing representation, a threshold of 8–10% is regarded as realistic. At this level, the number of parties could be reduced to around five or six, striking a balance between representation and governability.

With a higher threshold, party simplification would become more effective, political fragmentation reduced, and decision-making in the DPR more efficient. In the context of Indonesia's presidential system, which emphasizes checks and balances, such a policy is not intended to weaken opposition but to ensure stronger, more stable governance capable of implementing development programs without excessive political bargaining.

Accordingly, this study argues that the ideal parliamentary threshold for Indonesia is between **8% and 10%**. Thresholds in the range of 2.5–4% have proven insufficient, as they still allow 9–10 parties in parliament, perpetuating fragmentation and undermining presidential governance. A threshold of 8–10% would likely result in only 5–6 parties in parliament, which is considered sufficient to strengthen the presidential system while preserving fair political representation.

The Presidential System and the Multiparty System in the Indonesian Context

The relationship between the presidential system and multiparty politics has long been a subject of debate among political scientists. Most scholars conclude that these two systems are inherently difficult to reconcile because they embody contrasting principles. Juan Linz, one of the most frequently cited scholars on this issue, emphasized that governmental stability is more commonly found in parliamentary systems, where the executive is derived from, and dependent on, the majority support in the legislature [14]. In presidential systems, however, both the president and parliament derive their legitimacy directly from the people, which can create competing claims of authority and potential conflict when policy agendas diverge.

Presidentialism in the context of a multiparty system carries the risk of producing minority presidents and divided governments. Coalitions in presidential systems are

generally weaker than in parliamentary systems because legislators' commitment to party agreements is often fragile, and presidents retain the discretion to reorganize cabinets without being fully bound by party deals. In many cases, particularly in the run-up to the next election, coalition parties may withdraw support to protect their political identity.

There are three main challenges in coalition-building under presidentialism:

- a. The president does not need legislative support to remain in office, reducing the incentive to form durable coalitions.
- b. The nature of presidential elections fosters resistance to policy compromise.
- c. Presidential politics are inherently *zero-sum*, with the presidency itself as an indivisible prize, making coalition bargaining more unstable.

1. Indonesia's Configuration after the 1945 Constitutional Amendments

Before the amendments to the 1945 Constitution, Indonesia's governance often combined elements of both presidential and parliamentary systems [15]. Mahfud MD observed that although the Constitution formally established a presidential system, in practice many parliamentary features prevailed. Significant changes occurred after the constitutional amendments, which strengthened presidentialism by introducing the direct election of the president and vice president, removing presidential accountability to the MPR (People's Consultative Assembly), and affirming that executive power is exercised strictly according to the Constitution [16].

Nevertheless, the implementation of pure presidentialism in Indonesia remains constrained by its coexistence with a multiparty system [17]. The high degree of political fragmentation makes it rare for presidents to enjoy majority support in parliament. Coalitions tend to be fluid and fragile, frequently generating tensions between the executive and the legislature.

2. Typologies of Presidentialism in Multiparty Systems

Hanta Yuda categorizes four possible forms of presidentialism when combined with a multiparty system [17]:

- a. **Effective Presidentialism**
Occurs when both institutional structures and presidential leadership are strong, supported by a simplified party system.
- b. **Accommodative Presidentialism**
Occurs when institutions are strong but presidential leadership is weak; coalitions remain solid as long as the party system is relatively simple.
- c. **Confrontational Presidentialism**
Occurs when institutions are weak but presidential leadership is strong; executive-legislative relations become tense and conflict-prone.

d. **Reductive Presidentialism**

The least desirable condition, in which both institutions and presidential leadership are weak, leading to legislative dominance (*legislative heavy*).

Among these four, only effective presidentialism offers positive prospects, and even then it requires a simplified party system.

3. The Experience of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Administration

The administration of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) illustrates the difficulties of combining presidentialism with a multiparty system. Hanta Yuda characterizes his government as an example of *reductive presidentialism*, marked by weak institutional capacity and a leadership style inclined toward compromise. Although his coalition was large in quantity, it proved fragile in quality [18].

Prominent external compromises included:

a. **Cabinet formation**

Strong intervention from coalition parties reduced the president's prerogative.

b. **Coalition ties**

Fragile, often shifting, and heavily influenced by major parties such as Golkar.

c. **Relations with parliament**

Excessive legislative control, frequent threats of inquiry (*hak angket*), and political bargaining.

d. **Impeachment threats**

While actual impeachment was unlikely, the issue was often used as political leverage.

Internal compromises were also evident, such as ministers' dual loyalties (to both the president and their parties), the reduced exercise of presidential prerogative in cabinet structuring, and occasional disharmony between the president and vice president.

4. Implications and Urgency of Party Simplification

Indonesia's experience reinforces the thesis that presidentialism within a multiparty system is highly vulnerable to governmental inefficiency. One strategic solution is the simplification of political parties through the implementation of a parliamentary threshold. By limiting the number of parties represented in parliament, the president can form more cohesive coalitions, reduce fragmentation, and enhance governmental stability.

The fewer the number of parties that surpass the threshold, the greater the opportunity to establish effective presidentialism. Conversely, when too many parties are present in parliament, policymaking becomes prone to interest-based bargaining and even risks political deadlock. Thus, party simplification through the parliamentary threshold is not only a matter of government effectiveness but also of strengthening political stability

within the framework of presidentialism as mandated by the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia.

Based on this analysis, it is evident that simplifying political parties by enforcing a parliamentary threshold is closely tied to reinforcing the presidential system. A smaller number of parties in parliament will allow the presidential system to function more effectively and maintain governmental stability. However, if too many parties exceed the threshold, decision-making processes will be hampered, and governance will become unstable due to competing interests. Moreover, the failure of the party system could potentially trigger constitutional changes [19]. Therefore, the parliamentary threshold serves as an essential mechanism for party simplification, on the assumption that a streamlined party system will make Indonesia's presidential system stronger, more effective, and more stable.

Conclusion

Consistent parliamentary fragmentation since the 1999 to the 2024 elections has posed a structural obstacle to the effectiveness of Indonesia's presidential system. Although raising the parliamentary threshold has proven effective in reducing the number of parties in the DPR, the current threshold of 4% still allows a relatively large number of parties to gain representation. As a result, presidents remain dependent on broad, often fragile coalitions that are vulnerable to conflicting interests.

The implementation of a higher parliamentary threshold ideally between 8% and 10%, is considered necessary to produce a parliament with only five to six parties. Such a configuration would enable the formation of more cohesive governing coalitions, streamline the legislative process, and enhance political stability. Party simplification through this mechanism is not intended to restrict democracy but rather to reinforce the presidential system while maintaining the principle of representation.

In this regard, strengthening Indonesia's presidential system requires carefully designed electoral reforms that balance inclusivity with governability. By reducing fragmentation and ensuring stable executive–legislative relations, party simplification via the parliamentary threshold can contribute to a more effective, accountable, and enduring democratic system.

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