

Beyond legitimacy: How power and meaning sustain electoral order in Indonesia?

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Abstract

This study examines how electoral order in Indonesia is sustained not primarily through formal legitimacy, but through the interplay of power and meaning, drawing on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. While democratic institutions are normatively expected to rely on legal-rational legitimacy to ensure compliance, evidence from Indonesia illustrated through national election oversight practices and micro-level dynamics in culturally unique regions reveals that legitimacy often remains fragile and insufficient to regulate political behavior. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach with literature synthesis, regulatory analysis, and illustrative case materials, this paper argues that electoral stability emerges from two alternative modalities of structuration: domination (allocative and authoritative control over resources, institutions, and social relations) and signification (symbolic frameworks, cultural narratives, and moral authority). These modalities compensate for weak institutional legitimacy by shaping political conduct through resource management, moral persuasion, cultural norms, and narrative framing. The analysis shows that actors such as election supervisors, religious leaders, the media, and local elites play significant roles in reproducing electoral order. They operationalize power through institutional sanctions, resource allocation, and authority, while concurrently shaping meaning through culturally resonant communication, symbolic language, and ethical narratives. As a result, electoral peace in Indonesia is maintained not primarily because laws are accepted, but because social structures generate alternative pathways of compliance and stability. The study contributes to broader debates on electoral governance by demonstrating that in emerging democracies, power and signification may function as the primary stabilizing forces when legitimacy falters.

Keywords

Electoral study, Legitimacy and domination, Structuration governance

Introduction

Democratic theory commonly assumes that political order is upheld because institutions are legitimate [1]. Citizens obey rules because they believe those rules matter. They

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accept electoral outcomes because they trust that the process is fair. They comply with state authority because they see it as rightful. This assumption deeply rooted in classic political philosophy and contemporary democratic governance places legitimacy at the center of political stability [2].

Indonesia provides a revealing contradiction to this idea. Despite fluctuating trust in electoral institutions, recurring accusations of partiality, and persistent skepticism toward the neutrality of oversight bodies, electoral conflict rarely escalates into uncontrollable violence. Elections remain competitive, sometimes tense, but ultimately functional. Disputes arise, but they are contained. “Chaos” in the way outsiders often imagine it, does not materialize.

This resilience invites a critical rethinking of what sustains electoral order. If legitimacy is not consistently strong, why does the system still hold? What invisible structures enable stability during distrust? And why do citizens continue to participate even eagerly despite reservations about the fairness of the process?

This paper enters these questions through the analytical lens of Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory, which proposes that social order emerges from the ongoing interaction between rules, resources, and systems of meaning. Rather than viewing legitimacy as the sole foundation of order, Giddens encourages us to look at alternative modalities that shape behavior: domination, which reflects the distribution and use of power, and signification, which refers to the symbolic systems and cultural frameworks through which people interpret their world [3], [4], [5].

Indonesia’s electoral landscape diverse, complex, and culturally textured shows clear evidence that power and meaning often serve as stabilizing forces when legitimacy falters. Electoral actors respond not merely to rules, but to resource control, institutional authority, and cultural-religious norms. Citizens comply not only because they trust institutions, but because they recognize the symbolic and moral boundaries set by media, religious leaders, and community elders [1].

This argument becomes even more visible when examined through localized experiences. In Madura, for instance often viewed as a politically charged region with deep cultural traditions the fragility of formal legitimacy is striking. Interviews with members of the Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu), the Election Commission (KPU), journalists, and religious leaders reveal a recurring theme: trust is never fully given; it must be negotiated, performed, and constantly defended. Yet elections remain relatively stable, not because legitimacy is strong, but because other structures carry the burden of maintaining order.

A Bawaslu officer admitted openly:

“Pandangan itu tetap ada... tapi kami berusaha membuktikan bahwa kami netral.”

Suspicion lingers, but behavior remains controlled.

Similarly, a KPU officer described quietly replacing polling station staff suspected of bias without informing competing parties. This was not an act of fostering legitimacy; it was an exercise of allocative domination, using resource management to prevent escalation.

Media institutions made calculated linguistic choices such as avoiding the term *carok*, which carries violent connotations to shape public perception and reduce tension. Religious leaders invoked moral teachings to mediate conflict, demonstrating how signification governs political behavior [6], [7].

These patterns reveal a critical insight: electoral order in Indonesia is not primarily sustained by legitimacy, but by the interplay of power and meaning. Legitimacy remains desirable, but often insufficient. Power through authority, sanctions, and strategic resource allocation ensures compliance when trust is weak. Meaning through cultural norms, symbolic language, and moral narratives shapes how political actors understand and respond to conflict. Together, these modalities create a multidimensional foundation for stability [8].

This paper argues that recognizing the roles of domination and signification does not diminish democracy; instead, it reveals the social complexity behind its survival. Electoral governance is not merely a legal structure but a living system where rules, resources, and cultural frameworks constantly evolve. To understand why elections in Indonesia function as they do, one must look beyond the formal sphere of legitimacy and into the everyday interactions that reproduce order.

Therefore, the aim of this article is twofold. First, it seeks to refine theoretical understandings of electoral order by expanding the analysis beyond legitimacy. Second, it uses Indonesia particularly the microcosm of Madura to demonstrate how power and meaning operate as stabilizing modalities. In doing so, it offers a more nuanced explanation of why democracies endure even when trust in institutions is imperfect.

The sections that follow build this argument systematically. The theoretical framework elaborates on the modalities of structure in Giddens' theory. The methodological section outlines the interpretive approach used to synthesize regulatory and field-based insights. The findings illustrate how legitimacy, power, and meaning interact in electoral practice. The discussion interprets these findings through broader democratic theory [6], [9]. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the implications for electoral governance in Indonesia and similar contexts. Indonesia's experience teaches an important lesson: Democracy does not survive solely because its institutions are believed in; it survives because societies have multiple ways of enforcing order even when belief wavers.

Method

The methodological orientation of this study follows the interpretive tradition in social science, which assumes that political order cannot be understood solely through institutional design or legal frameworks. Instead, it must be examined as a lived social practice shaped by interpretation, negotiation, and the everyday decisions of actors

embedded in cultural and structural contexts. In this sense, method is not merely a technical step in research but a lens through which reality becomes intelligible [10].

This paper therefore adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and structural approach, integrating conceptual analysis with grounded illustrations drawn from Indonesia's electoral experience. While the main argument is theoretical seeking to rethink electoral stability beyond the normative focus on legitimacy it is enriched by empirical insights from earlier fieldwork, including interviews with election supervisors, commissioners, journalists, and religious leaders in Madura. These voices are used not to represent statistical generalities but to illuminate how political actors navigate rules, power, and meaning in real settings. The method revolves around three interrelated components on the Figure 1.

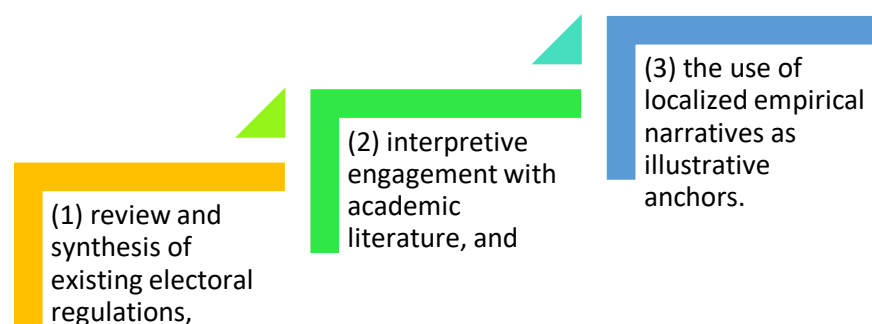


Figure 1. Interrelated component

Rather than presenting these elements as discrete methodological tools, this section describes how they intertwine to form a coherent approach that aligns with the study's theoretical commitments.

Interpretive orientation: Understanding practices, not just rules

Elections in Indonesia are governed by extensive legal texts: the electoral law, Bawaslu regulations, KPU decrees, and countless operational guidelines. Yet these texts tell only part of the story. They describe how elections should work, not how actors actually behave [11].

An interpretive method seeks to bridge this gap by examining how institutional rules are understood, enacted, contested, or reinterpreted by the people responsible for carrying them out. Political actors do not simply follow rules; they interpret them within cultural contexts, power relationships, and moral expectations. For this reason, interpretive research is particularly useful when analyzing situations where formal legitimacy is weak or unstable.

An approach that privileges interpretation allows researchers to see the nuance behind compliance and conflict: the tone of a supervisor's reassurance, the moral appeal of a religious leader, or the linguistic subtlety used by journalists to de-escalate tension. These are elements that traditional institutional or behavioral methods often overlook.

Structuration as analytical lens

Giddens' structuration theory is not a methodology in the strict sense but a way of thinking about social processes. It encourages researchers to trace the reciprocal relationship between structure and agency between rules that guide behavior and the actors who enact and transform those rules [12].

This study uses structuration theory as the analytical grammar that organizes the interpretation of data. The three modalities legitimacy, domination, and signification serve as conceptual pathways for reading the empirical material. Rather than coding interviews mechanically, the analysis seeks to understand the logic of action: what motivates actors, how they navigate dilemmas, and why they choose certain strategies when rules alone cannot calm tensions. In this sense, structuration provides a bridge between micro-level practices and macro-level electoral order.

Results and discussion

Legitimacy in fragile condition, power as stabilizer, and meaning as cultural infrastructure of electoral order. Organized according to the structuration modalities that frame the analysis: legitimacy, domination, and signification. Rather than treating these as isolated phenomena, the findings highlight how each modality emerges in practice, how actors draw upon them to navigate political tension, and how their interaction collectively sustains electoral order in Indonesia.

The findings draw heavily on interpretive insights. Rules, in themselves, do not reveal how actors behave; it is in their lived experiences their words, decisions, dilemmas, and improvisations that structure becomes visible. The narratives from Madura serve as a critical lens, not because Madura is exceptional, but because it allows us to witness the fragility of legitimacy and the compensatory role of power and meaning with remarkable clarity.

The fragility of institutional legitimacy

One of the most striking findings is that institutional legitimacy in Indonesia's electoral process is rarely stable. It exists, but often in a fragile state, constantly negotiated, contested, or doubted. The institutions themselves are keenly aware of this fragility.

A Bawaslu officer in Madura expressed this tension plainly: "Pandangan itu tetap ada... tapi kami berusaha membuktikan bahwa kami netral." ("Those accusations always exist... but we keep proving that we are neutral.")

This confession shows that neutrality, the core basis of electoral legitimacy, is not taken for granted by the public. Election supervisors must perform legitimacy in every interaction through transparency, procedural consistency, and public communication. Yet the officer's tone suggests a weary awareness that such efforts, no matter how sincere, are never fully convincing.

Legitimacy here behaves less like a solid foundation and more like a moving target. Its fragility is rooted in several factors:

1. Persistent suspicion of partisan bias

Communities, candidates, and supporting networks often enter the election arena already predisposed to distrust institutions. Historical tensions, political patronage, and socio-cultural affiliations shape their expectations long before election day.

2. Discrepancy between legal norms and local realities

Legal frameworks promote neutrality, but local cultures sometimes prioritize loyalty, reciprocity, or honor over procedural adherence.

Emotional intensity of political competition

In tightly contested regions, losing is not merely a political outcome but a symbolic defeat, making neutrality harder to believe. These pressures create a legitimacy deficit that institutions alone struggle to fill. Even KPU officials acknowledge this predicament but attempt to manage it pragmatically. One commissioner explained how they quietly replaced KPPS members who were suspected of partisan ties: *“Strateginya... KPPS itu kami bersihkan dan kami ganti tanpa sepengetahuan kedua belah pihak.”* (“Our strategy... was to clean up the KPPS and replace them without either side knowing.”)

This action was not aimed at strengthening legitimacy as moral belief; instead, it served to prevent immediate conflict. What emerges here is a recognition that legitimacy is insufficient as a controlling mechanism. The institution must resort to other modalities to maintain stability.

1. Allocative and authoritative domination as mechanisms of stability

Where legitimacy falters, electoral actors rely on domination not in the authoritarian sense but in Giddens’ meaning: the strategic use of resources and authority to structure social interaction.

2. Allocative domination: Control over election infrastructure

Allocative domination refers to a system’s ability to mobilize material resources logistics, personnel, infrastructure, and administrative channels to shape outcomes. The KPU’s decision to rotate KPPS members exemplifies this form of domination. By selectively reassigning personnel, the institution mitigates suspicion, stabilizes the polling environment, and removes potential triggers of conflict. This approach acknowledges a reality rarely discussed in formal reports: elections survive because institutions quietly manage risks behind the scenes.

Allocative domination also manifests in the technological and informational resources used by institutions. The adoption of digital reporting, rapid response systems, and hierarchical communication channels enhance the institution’s

ability to control flows of information and prevent misinformation from escalating tensions.

3. Authoritative domination: The power to sanction and regulate behavior

Authoritative domination, by contrast, centers on the ability to regulate human conduct. For Bawaslu, legality is not just a normative principle; it is a tool that allows supervisors to discipline actors.

A Bawaslu official described how the institutional transformation into a permanent body reshaped public perception: *“Ketika Bawaslu sudah menjadi lembaga permanen... ini menjadi shock therapy bagi masyarakat.”* (“When Bawaslu became a permanent institution... it served as shock therapy for the public”)

The term “shock therapy” is revealing. It implies that authoritative presence alone its symbolic weight, its legal teeth sets boundaries for acceptable behavior. This authority helps contain disputes that might otherwise spill into street-level conflict.

Authoritative domination also appears in dispute hearings, where supervisors decide the fate of candidate complaints. Even when their decisions are contested, the very existence of a formal adjudicative process redirects anger away from violent confrontation and toward institutional channels.

4. The interdependence of allocative and authoritative domination

The findings show that allocative and authoritative domination are not separate or competing powers; they reinforce each other. Allocative decisions resource allocation, personnel rotation are only effective when backed by authoritative legitimacy. Conversely, authoritative commands lose efficacy without allocative capacity. Together, they form a practical infrastructure for maintaining peace when normative belief (legitimacy) is insufficient.

Signification: Cultural and symbolic practices that anchor electoral behavior

Beyond norms and power, the findings highlight the crucial role of meaning-making, or signification, in sustaining political order. In Indonesia, political behavior is deeply intertwined with cultural values, religious teachings, and communal identity.

1. Media’s role in reframing conflict

Journalistic practices offer a rich illustration. Radar Madura’s editorial choice to avoid using the term *carok* a culturally loaded word associated with violent retribution reflects a deliberate symbolic strategy.

A journalist explained: *“Makanya diksi yang kita pilih tetap satu: penganiayaan.”* (“That is why the word we chose consistently was: assault.”)

This choice is not about legal accuracy; it is about managing public emotions. The wrong word could activate historical memories, escalate anger, or spark

retaliatory narratives. In this sense, media play a role akin to cultural guardians, moderating discourse through linguistic sensitivity.

2. Religious authority as moral anchoring

Religious leaders, especially within NU structures, hold immense symbolic capital. The chairman of PCNU recalled organizing dialogues with competing groups to prevent escalation: "*Pada 2018 kami adakan silaturahmi... tujuannya mengunci gelanggang.*" ("In 2018 we held a dialogue... the aim was to lock the arena.") "Locking the arena" here means closing spaces where conflict might intensify. Religious authority reframes political tension as a moral issue, redirecting partisan energy toward communal responsibility. This is signification at work: meaning becomes governance.

3. Cultural codes: Honor, shame, and collective identity

The cultural concept of "*ajhina*" (honor/shame) strongly influences political behavior in Madura. A Bawaslu officer described how political conflict is often reframed:

"Konflik politik itu biasanya dilarikan ke urusan etika... malu kalau Madura kalah." ("Political conflict is often shifted into matters of ethics... it is shameful if Madura loses.") This means that avoidance of conflict is not merely about obeying rules; it is about preserving dignity. Compliance arises not from legitimacy but from cultural expectations.

The synthesis of modalities: How order emerges

The central finding of this study demonstrates that electoral order in Indonesia cannot be adequately explained through the lens of legitimacy alone. In practice, formal legitimacy derived from legal frameworks, electoral institutions, and procedural compliance often appears fragile, unevenly internalized, and insufficient to regulate political behavior during moments of heightened contestation. In several cases, legitimacy does not function as the primary stabilizing force at all. Instead, electoral stability is sustained through a dynamic interaction among three modalities: fragile legitimacy, pragmatic domination, and symbolic meaning-making.

These modalities do not operate independently; rather, they form a compensatory and mutually reinforcing structure. When formal legitimacy weakens due to distrust in institutions, elite fragmentation, or contested electoral outcomes mechanisms of domination step in to regulate conduct. This domination is not always overtly coercive but frequently pragmatic, operating through control over resources, authority networks, security arrangements, and informal power brokers capable of enforcing order at the local level. Such domination curbs escalation and contains conflict, yet it risks generating resentment or moral dissonance within communities.

At this juncture, signification becomes crucial. Symbolic meaning-making through religious authority, cultural norms, and locally resonant narratives provides moral

justification and social acceptance for both institutional decisions and power interventions. Symbols of unity, religious obligation, and communal harmony reframe political compliance as ethical responsibility rather than forced submission. However, signification alone lacks durability when it diverges from formal legal norms or electoral procedures.

Consequently, legitimacy is not merely upheld but continuously renegotiated through this interaction. Legal-institutional authority absorbs symbolic validation, while domination is softened by moral narratives that render power acceptable. This triadic configuration constitutes the backbone of Indonesia's electoral resilience: a flexible governance architecture that maintains order not through normative consensus alone, but through the strategic balancing of authority, power, and meaning in contexts where democratic legitimacy remains structurally vulnerable.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine a question that is often overlooked in democratic theory: How do elections remain stable when legitimacy is fragile? Traditional frameworks tend to assume that trust in institutions is the core foundation of democratic order, and that legitimacy is both the prerequisite and outcome of successful elections. Yet empirical realities in Indonesia especially when viewed through the illuminating context of Madura tell a more complex story.

The findings reveal that electoral order in Indonesia is not upheld primarily by legitimacy. Instead, it survives through the interplay of domination (power) and signification (meaning), two structuration modalities that compensate for the limitations of legitimacy in practice. Using Giddens' theory, this study argues that social systems do not rely on a single pillar of support; they are reproduced through multilayered interactions between norms, resources, and cultural narratives. Elections endure not because institutions are universally believed in, but because society possesses the structural diversity to maintain order through multiple channels.

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