

Critical Reflection on the Empty Box Phenomenon and Political Party Cadre Crisis

I Kadek Sudiarsana¹, Gusti Fadhil Fithrian Luthfan², Johan Tri Noval Hendrian Tombi³

Universitas Mulawarman, Jl. Sambaliung No.1, Sempaja Selatan, Samarinda and 75119, Indonesia

Article Info

Article history:

Accepted: 30 April 2025

Publish: 12 May 2025

Keywords:

Political Parties;

Empty Box;

Quality of Democracy.

Abstract

Indonesia's democratic life in the 2024 elections is characterized by complex dynamics, such as demonstrations against the alleged constitutional disobedience by the Bales DPR and the empty box phenomenon in 37 regions. This indicates the degradation of the quality of democracy, where political parties that should be a forum for political education are instead shackled by the hegemony of fat coalitions, ignoring the function of regeneration. This normative juridical research uses statutory and conceptual approaches, with qualitative data analysis, concluding that parties fail to optimize their strategic role in democracy. The empty box phenomenon reflects the pragmatism of political parties that are trapped in the comfort zone of coalitions, even losing the basic philosophy of their establishment. The implications include election budget inefficiency, inhibition of regional strategic programs due to risk-averse acting regional heads, and threats to the quality of development. To restore democracy, the author proposes: (1) limiting political party coalitions, (2) reformulating the requirements for independent pathways in regional elections, and (3) preventing power domination in order to create a competitive democratic ecosystem with integrity.

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Corresponding Author:

I Kadek Sudiarsana

Universitas Mulawarman

Email: kadeksudiarsana@fh.unmul.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia, as a country that prioritizes democracy, is expected to be able to realize democratic laws. Satjipto Rahardjo stated that the legal state being developed is not an absolute rechtsstaat, but a democratic legal state (state) that is democratic. This has the consequence of the supremacy of the constitution as a form of implementing democracy. Furthermore, law was created not merely to regulate, but to achieve noble goals, namely justice, happiness and welfare of the people.

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Political parties produce political actors in the DPR, DPRD, as well as the executive, namely presidents, governors, regents and mayors. However, the democratic events leading up to the 2024 regional head elections (Pilkada) have not shown that political parties are prioritizing this important role, but rather political parties tend to choose to form large, "fat" coalitions for the sole purpose of winning. For parties, the priority is electability so that

those who are strong in terms of mass and funds can be the candidates to be put forward, not those who have political capacity and integrity.

On the other hand, the lead up to the 2024 regional election contest is also characterized by various public expressions. There began to be public demonstrations against attempts at constitutional disobedience which were allegedly intended to be carried out by the Legislative Body of the People's Representative Council (Baleg DPR) through the ratification of the Pilkada Bill, although this attempt was ultimately canceled. The reason is that Baleg is suspected of wanting to deviate from Constitutional Court Decision Number 60 which relates to the threshold for parliamentary/regional head nominations for political parties and non-political parties and Decision Number 70 regarding the age limit requirements for regional head candidates which is a breath of fresh air for regional head candidates who wish to run for the 2024 regional elections.

Until then, the main issue in this research was the emergence of empty boxes in various regions of Indonesia. The Indonesian General Election Commission (KPU) in its press conference said that it had determined the pairs of regional head candidates and deputy regional head candidates and had also announced that there were 43 (forty three) regions in Indonesia that would have a single candidate in the 2024 regional elections. This single candidate means that in this democratic party, contestants will face an empty box when voting on the 2024 regional election agenda.

Of course, this condition is quite unfortunate. Bearing in mind that historically the existence of political parties has played an important role in efforts to mobilize the spirit of the Indonesian nation's struggle for independence, and now it is time to fulfill this independence, especially independence in democracy, that political parties should return to their dignity, namely as producers of quality leaders for the future. This includes how political parties play an important role in preventing corruption, because as stated by Herdiansyah, apart from a person's character, corruption cases are also blamed on the failure of political parties. This condition shows that political parties are in danger of losing their dignity. Of course, what is hoped is that political parties do not fail as political institutions so that they can damage public trust in the democratic system.

Based on the problems of Indonesian democracy and the important role of political parties, it is hoped that in the future we can minimize the empty box phenomenon. The importance of presenting potential leaders can be a vehicle for the democratic maturation of Indonesian society. On the other hand, it is a breath of fresh air when there is the courage of a new leader candidate who dares to appear to compete with the incumbent, for example, because in practice political parties and newcomers are not brave because they are afraid of facing the incumbent candidate. Therefore, political parties are expected to be able to move the political education machine more optimally, including independent leadership candidates who are also expected to be able to fill the democratic space of society. This once again aims to maintain and encourage the quality of Indonesian democracy to be realized.

In other words, this research seeks to answer the question: what is the role of political parties in Indonesian democracy and what are the implications of the empty box phenomenon in regional elections for the hope of realizing quality democracy in Indonesia in the future?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research in this paper is normative juridical research. Donald Black further explained that the normative juridical approach/legal doctrine examines the order of norms. Normative legal research is research carried out by reviewing documents in the form of

statutory regulations, books, legal journals, legal articles. Another name for normative legal research is doctrinaire legal research, also called library research or document study. As doctrinal legal research, because this research is carried out or aimed only at written regulations or other legal materials. The approaches used in this research are, the legal approach and the historical approach, to understand the basic concepts of the birth of the institution called the Constitutional Court, its functions and authority. The nature of the research used in this writing is descriptive, this legal writing aims to provide a clear picture of the variables that have been researched in this legal writing.

The type of data used is secondary data, data obtained from the literature or indirectly. Using primary, secondary and tertiary legal materials. Especially related to statutory regulations, namely the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia Amendment, Law Number 24 of 2003 Jo. Law Number 8 of 2011 Jo. Law Number 7 of 2020 concerning the Constitutional Court, Law Number 10 of 2016 concerning the Second Amendment to Law Number 1 of 2015 concerning the Determination of Government Regulations in Lieu of Law Number 1 of 2014 concerning the Election of Governors, Regents and Mayors into Law.

The data analysis technique used in this writing is that data and documents obtained from library research are analyzed descriptively qualitatively. The approach used is based on a normative juridical approach, namely analyzing laws related to the problem under study. Then the research results obtained by the author in library research are presented descriptively, namely explaining and presenting the data obtained as is from the research results, then conclusions are drawn to answer the problems raised in this legal writing.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Even though currently there are many slanted arguments in society regarding political parties, it cannot be denied that to mature Indonesian democracy cannot be separated from the role of political parties and politics itself. Quoting Herdiansyah Hamzah's term (Hamzah, 2021) that "If politics is avoided, it will actually run over us. The best way is to lead and control it. However, we need politics with dignity, namely politics without corruption." Political parties have a strategic role in the life of Indonesian democracy from before Indonesia's independence until now. Political parties are believed to be the pillars of democracy whose main role is to be the printing machine for future leaders. Thomas Meyer stated that political parties play a role in translating the values and interests of a society from the bottom up and then crystallizing them through legislation, policy regulations and other programs for the people. (Najib, 2020) However, along the way, political parties often go off the rails and have not been able to fulfill their role optimally. In fact, nowadays political parties are competing to express support for "fat" coalitions that tend to silence democracy itself. Coalitions should be formed to nominate leadership candidates based on the same vision, mission and ideology of political parties as a representation of people's aspirations, but in reality the coalitions formed are pragmatic coalitions in the context of efforts to strengthen short-term interests and are full of compromise or transactional. (Ekowati, 2019)

This political pragmatism is the source of problems in political and state activities. Lili Romli explained 2 coalition models that occur in the political system in Indonesia, namely policy blind coalitions, namely coalitions that are not based on policy considerations and policy-based coalitions, namely coalitions based on preferences for policy objectives to be realized. (Romli, 2018).

Table 1. Political Party Coalition Model (Romli, 2018)

<i>Policy Blind Coalition</i>	<i>Policy-Based Coalitions</i>
Emphasizes the principle of size or number of chairs	Emphasize similarities in policy preferences
Minimal winning coalitions	Minimal connected coalitions
The party's assumption is that it aims to "office seeking" (maximize power)	The party's assumption is that it aims to "office seeking" (realize policies according to party interests)
The loyalty of coalition participants is difficult to guarantee	The loyalty of coalition participants is minimally bound by shared policy goals
It is difficult to predict, and the size range of the number of parties varies greatly	Coalitions can be overweight by involving parties that are not necessary for policy objectives to receive majority support.

The coalition model above is the result of pragmatism in politics so that political parties no longer use the vision, mission and ideology of political parties as a frame of reference in forming coalitions but are based solely on seeking rent and power. (Rishan, 2020) This confirms that there are weaknesses in political party institutions in Indonesia so that political parties prioritize political pragmatism without a clear policy basis. There are at least four things that cause this. (Taufiqurrohman, 2020) First, the recruitment process for party members and leaders is not fully and systematically regulated, so this process is carried out without considering competence, dedication, or adequate understanding of the political party's vision and mission. Second, there are no regulations governing whether a new member can sit in the ranks of functionaries and party structures. Someone with popularity and wealth can immediately fill important positions in a political party. Third, the communication mechanism between party cadres and members of parliament with their constituents or the people to understand the aspirations developing in society is not sufficiently regulated and is not implemented, causing what Bivitri Susanti describes as breaking down communication bridges and giving birth to political elite circles. (Bivitri Susanti, 2024) Fourth, the party cadre process which is carried out in stages to understand the party's ideology and strategic program as well as increasing leadership abilities is not carried out seriously and consistently. This problem has an impact on the quality of leadership and tends to give rise to trust issues for political parties in the eyes of the public.

3.1. Strategic Role of Political Parties

In fact, political parties have a role (*role*) and position (*status*) strategic in democratic life. Political parties are the link between the government process and citizens, and quite a few public views say that political parties are the ones who determine democracy itself, as expressed by Schattscheider in 1942. Such conditions position the existence of political parties as an important pillar in every democratic political system such as Indonesia. Even though it is a developing issue in society, quite a few are pessimistic about the existence of political parties, that political parties are nothing more than political vehicles for a group of ruling elites who have certain "interests" in achieving power, so political parties are often seen as tools for a few people.

Basically, political academics as quoted by Miriam Budihardjo state that there are 4 (four) functions of political parties, namely, (1) political communication is by channeling various opinions and aspirations of the community. (2) political socialization, political parties also educate their members to become human beings who are aware of their responsibilities as citizens. (3) political recruitment, political

parties function to find and invite talented people to actively participate in political activities as party members (*political recruitment*). The party that was formed was intended to be a legitimate vehicle for selecting state leadership cadres at certain levels and positions. These cadres are then directly elected by the people. (4) conflict regulator, differences of opinion in a democratic climate are a normal matter so that if conflict occurs, political parties try to resolve it. These four functions are equally related to one another. However, unfortunately, as time goes by, political parties are not yet seen optimally in carrying out the functions as mentioned above. One of the points that concerns the author is related to the function of political recruitment (*political recruitment*) which should be a vehicle for political education and selecting cadres of state and regional leaders for certain levels of positions. (Anggono, 2019)

3.2. Failure of Regeneration of Political Parties

This was confirmed in the 2024 Regional Election event where there were still single candidates found in certain areas, so that the existing single candidate would be faced with an empty box. Of course, this condition is quite unfortunate because Indonesia itself has quite a large number of parties, but it seems that political parties are not yet brave enough to offer their own cadres to take part in political contestation but instead choose to form coalitions, even "fat" coalitions. Political parties are often trapped in patronage politics where leadership tends to be inherited by certain figures who are considered to have electability or financial strength, rather than based on meritocracy. This tradition of pragmatism within political parties ultimately prevents potential young cadres from appearing on the surface so that parties do not have the option to nominate the best cadres resulting from party regeneration. The failure of political party regeneration is shown by data that as many as 57 (fifty seven) regional heads transferred power from husband to wife or from parents to children. The behavior of transferring power to one's wife, children, sister, brother-in-law, or even son-in-law is a strategy for maintaining and preserving family power in government management, both at regional and national levels in Indonesia. This practice adorns Indonesian democracy through political parties and regional elections. (Nika, 2021)

3.3. Implications of "Fat" Coalitions of Political Parties

The lack of even limited space for the opposition to move will actually lead to an unhealthy democracy. The absence of control by political parties has the impact of giving rise to arbitrary actions by those exercising or holding power. Failure to realize checks and balances will have a negative impact on government administration, even encouraging the creation of an oligarchic government and strengthening the status quo. Idul Rishan revealed that there are 3 implications of a fat coalition of political parties: (Rishan, 2020) Firstly, government tends to be compromised as a result of the merger of executive and legislative powers. This compromise action was carried out of course in order to maintain coalition harmony which ultimately resulted in the legislative oversight function of the executive becoming weak. Policies resulting from this practice will often prioritize the interests of the coalition over the interests of the community. Second, a fat coalition does not fully guarantee government stability. A fat coalition has the potential to cause internal conflict due to the different agendas of each coalition member party and if the demands of the coalition members are not met then friction and disputes will arise. Tensions within the coalition will threaten political stability and hamper government performance. Third, a fat coalition can become an authoritarian trap. The absence of a strong opposition can create an authoritarian trap for a regional head because there is no supervision and criticism. If this happens, policies will be implemented without adequate consultation with other

parties without transparency. A fat coalition of political parties will reduce the public's credibility and trust in democracy because it eliminates dynamics and healthy competition in democracy itself, which can lead to public dissatisfaction and distrust of political parties.

3.4. Implications of the Empty Box for Regional Elections and the Hope of Quality Democracy in Indonesia

There is new hope for regional head candidates and deputy regional head candidates after the Constitutional Court Decisions Numbers 60 and 70 as referred to above. The a quo MK decision actually provides an open space for political parties to be able to propose and nominate their best cadres. However, this opportunity was not accompanied by optimism for political parties to nominate candidates from their own cadres. This then gave rise to the phenomenon of empty boxes in various regions of Indonesia. The Constitutional Court has opened the tap and opened up opportunities for political parties to dare to nominate their own cadres, but in reality not many political parties have the courage to appear but prefer to form large coalitions with other political parties. Joining a coalition of other political parties, on the other hand, negates that Indonesian political parties are not yet ready to compete and are confident in nominating regional head candidates from their own cadres.

The empty box phenomenon seems to confirm that there is some kind of "failure" of political parties in preparing their best cadres to be able to offer them to the public and participate in contesting the 2024 regional election democratic party. The large number of regions that only offer a single candidate is a critical reflection of a region in presenting the best sons and daughters of the region to have the courage to take part in the democratic party as well as for political parties which are expected to be able to produce the best cadres through political education.

It cannot be denied that the public could choose the empty box in the 2024 regional elections. This effort could occur when the community views that the existing single regional head candidate is deemed unable to bring about significant changes in development efforts, or on the other hand, there is a desire to be led by a new leader who is expected to be more responsive. Of course, if the empty box then becomes the choice of the people in a region, then *mutatis mutandis* it cannot be denied that the regional elections for the region that wins the empty box will hold regional elections again. The impact of the empty box phenomenon in the 2024 regional elections is:

3.4.1 Inefficiency in the Implementation of Regional Elections

This then has consequences for the budget, for example, which should be completed in 1 (one) round of regional elections but then has to spend additional budget for further regional elections. On the other hand, it will also have implications for the provision of time and human resources to prepare for the follow-up regional elections, which will also in principle affect cost efficiency. However, whatever happens, Indonesia must continue to encourage and present an educational and quality democracy. On the other hand, political parties are expected to return to their spirit, namely carrying out political education, so that they hope to have more choices of the best cadres in contestation, rather than being shackled to the comfort zone of coalitions.

Holding regional elections with empty boxes of course still requires the involvement of election organizers according to procedures and voter enthusiasm may also be reduced due to the lack of candidate choices. Time and all available resources must be used to manage the Pilkada process which is actually not

optimal due to the lack of candidate choices. In this situation, it not only creates inefficiencies in the implementation of regional elections but also erodes participation and the legitimacy of the elections themselves because the democratic process becomes meaningless and does not provide learning for the community about the expected democratic process.

3.4.2 Sustainability of the Strategic Work Program

In reality, this situation shows that there is a crisis of cadres or political parties trapped in the comfort zone of political party coalitions. If the empty box wins based on the provisions of Article 54 (D) of the Regional Election Law, then the regional head will be filled by a temporary acting person until the regional head is definitively elected. An acting regional head does not have the same strong political legitimacy as an elected regional head, because an acting regional head is appointed by the government through the Ministry of Home Affairs. In fact, such conditions will actually be a bit hampered in efforts to make strategic policies. Because generally temporary officials do not have enough courage to take strategic policies which of course also have quite high risks. Various strategic policies will be difficult for an acting regional head to implement because they cannot make decisions that impact aspects of organization, staffing, budget allocation and other strategic policies before receiving approval from the Minister of Home Affairs. (Rahmazani, 2023) Limited space and weak political legitimacy will tend to make acting regional heads choose to play it safe so that the sustainability of important programs will be disrupted. We can use an example of what happened to the acting regional head of DKI Jakarta, namely that several policies issued received criticism because they were contrary to the policies of previous officials and were considered to have acted arbitrarily by a number of elements of society. (Rahmazani, 2023) Strategic programs that cannot be implemented by the acting regional head have the potential to hinder development in the region and will have a negative impact on society. This condition is of course very detrimental to society and has the impact of decreasing public trust in local government.

3.5. Hope for Quality Democracy in Indonesia

As many as 43 regions in Indonesia are expected to be filled with single candidates in the 2024 Pilkada, meaning that these regions will face empty boxes when voting. (MUZAKI, 2024b) The quality of Indonesian democracy is being tested again by the rise of the empty box phenomenon and "fat" coalitions, which shows that clear structural and regulatory reforms are urgently needed so that the political process runs more competitively and fairly. Quality democracy must be able to provide real choices to the community, avoid the domination of certain groups, and encourage the emergence of new leaders who are able to answer public needs. To answer this, efforts that can be taken are:

3.5.1 Forming PKPU Rules for Coalition Restrictions

Even though there has been a breath of fresh air through Constitutional Court Decisions Number 60 and 70 which opened up wider space for regional head candidacy, this golden opportunity is considered not very attractive for political parties that are confined to the comfort zone of coalitions. Therefore, efforts to form a policy of limiting coalitions are not intended to curb democracy but merely as an effort to create quality democracy, so that there are no more "fat" coalitions that produce single candidates and present an empty box phenomenon. By limiting coalitions, political parties will be more encouraged

to seek and prepare their own cadres to participate in democratic competition without always relying on large coalitions. The hope is that this will set in motion the wheels of healthy political party regeneration and open up broad opportunities for political parties to compete fairly.

3.5.2 Policy Reformulation for Independent Pathway Regional Head Candidates

So far it has been quite difficult for independent route regional head candidates to compete due to the quite complicated requirements, the provisions of the Regional Election Law regarding the requirements for regional head candidates on the independent route. *independent* stating that the required percentage of support, namely 6.5% to 10% of the total voter list, is considered to be burdensome for candidates from the independent route. This percentage is not a small number for candidates who come from non-political parties. burdens that are too heavy can prevent independent candidates from participating in the regional elections. (Prasetyo, 2024) As a result, allegations of "falsification or theft of data" emerged that were used to fulfill the requirements for running for the independent route. (cagub) and deputy governor (cawagub) independent route to run for the 2024 Jakarta Pilkada. However, many Jakarta residents claim to be victims whose KTP Family Identification Numbers (NIK) were taken away unilaterally to support independent candidate pairs for the DKI Jakarta Gubernatorial Election." *Election House*, August 16 2024, <https://rumahpemilu.org/bawaslu-besar-segera-tindakpanjangi-dugaan-penyalahgunaan-data-pilkada-dki-jakarta/>. Therefore, it is important to reformulate policies by lowering the nomination threshold so that it is easier for independent candidates to fulfill the requirements. As an alternative, experience in the field of public service or involvement in the community can also be considered. Apart from that, incentives are provided, such as campaign financing or logistical assistance, for independent candidates who meet certain criteria. This alternative step allows independent candidates to compete on a more equal basis with party candidates, without having to be burdened by complicated requirements and large campaign expenditures.

3.5.3 Preventing Power Domination

This effort was conveyed by Herdiansyah Hamzah Herdiansyah Hamzah, *Politics Without Corruption* (West Java: CV. Rumah Pustaka, 2021), p. 27. in a book entitled "Politics Without Corruption" views that dominating power tends to form cronies or what is known as oligarchy, where the composition of power will tend to consist of relatives, family and political power. Herdiansyah's view in this article is relevant that when a political party tends to be shackled by the comfort zone of a "fat" coalition, there is the potential for *lost control* which will then have the impact of not being created *check and balance* in exercising government power. Therefore, it is hoped that efforts to realize quality democracy can be a concrete solution in preventing the domination of power.

Efforts to bring quality democracy are not without reason. It is hoped that quality democracy can be reflected in national and state life, especially a quality system of power. Herdiansyah Hamzah said that corrupt behavior is also supported by the system that encourages it. If power is centralized, authoritarian and oppressive, it is not impossible that corruption will continue to occur. (Hamzah, 2021) In line with Heridansyah's view, the author finds a common

thread, namely that if a government is driven by a strong coalition and even closes down any opposition, then this condition also has the potential to encourage arbitrary actions by state administrators, in this case power holders. So, the hope is that in running the government system apart from the community, political parties are also expected to be able to control the implementation of government. The hope of all of us is to be able to realize the principles of national and state life by holding firmly to realizing a "*good governance*" Government that is run healthily by providing accountability, transparency and participation. (Hamzah, 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

This research found that political parties actually have a strategic role in democratic life, but currently this role is not optimized, so it can be said that political parties are experiencing setbacks and even failing in political education, especially cadre formation. The phenomenon of empty boxes in the 2024 regional elections is a reflection that political parties tend to be shackled in the hegemony of the comfort zone of "fat" coalitions. Furthermore, political parties seem to have lost their basic founding philosophy. On the other hand, an empty box has bad implications for Indonesian democratic life, such as, there is a condition of budget inefficiency for holding elections/pilkada which certainly has an impact on human resources and time, it also has an impact on strategic work programs which are expected to accelerate development in the regions, because generally PJ regional heads tend to take a "safe" position and minimize risk taking. The recommendations for restoring the spirit of quality democracy in Indonesia are, first, limiting political party coalitions. This effort aims to revive it so that quality democracy can be realized in the future. The policy of limiting political party coalitions is not a restraint on democracy but rather an effort to provide quality democracy, with the hope that political parties will compete to present the best cadres rather than falling into the coalition's comfort zone. Second, policy reformulation for independent pathway requirements, in this case, for example, easing the requirements for collecting evidence of support and taking into account experience in the field of public service or involvement in the community. Apart from that, providing incentives, such as campaign financing. Through these various recommendations, it is hoped that quality democracy can be revived.

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