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From Hashtags to Streets: Youth Political Mobilization and Democratic Accountability in Indonesia

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Abstract:
Indonesia's digitally connected public sphere has become a consequential arena for youth mobilization, yet the democratic value of online dissent cannot be inferred from hashtag visibility alone. This study examines how digital expression, collective action, and demands for institutional accountability interacted across electoral controversy in 2024, the #IndonesiaGelap protests of February 2025, and public demonstrations in August 2025. Using a comparative documentary design, the analysis integrates independently published scholarship, official electoral statistics, internet penetration surveys, fact-checking records, and contemporaneous reporting available through November 2026. Evidence is evaluated through source triangulation and a mechanism-oriented comparison rather than unsupported causal estimation. Indonesia's internet penetration increased from 79.50 percent in 2024 to 81.72 percent in 2026, while the 2024 voter register included 46.8 million Generation Z citizens and 66.8 million millennials. These structural conditions facilitated political visibility but did not guarantee equal participation, factual reliability, or policy responsiveness. The case comparison identifies five linked mechanisms: grievance framing, distributed amplification, identity-based coordination, offline conversion, and public accountability feedback. Disinformation, algorithmic selectivity, unequal connectivity, and episodic institutional response interrupted those pathways. The study proposes a conditional digital-to-democratic accountability framework in which meaningful impact depends on verifiable information, organizational bridging, protected civic space, and traceable governmental follow-through. The findings offer a transparent secondary-data account of contemporary Indonesian mobilization without representing documentary observations as original interview or survey results.

Keyword: Digital Activism; Youth Mobilization; Democratic; Politic

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has entered a period in which public controversies become visible not only through parties, civic associations, and street demonstrations, but also through short videos, reposted screenshots, hashtags, and networked conversations. The shift is

politically consequential because a message can acquire national recognition before formal organizations have defined a common agenda. Yet visibility, engagement, and democratic influence are distinct phenomena. A widely circulated expression of anger may attract attention without changing institutional behavior, while a smaller campaign can generate concrete oversight when activists communicate verifiable demands and coordinate beyond the platform. Understanding that distinction is necessary for evaluating the recent trajectory of youth-led political mobilization in Indonesia. The present study treats digital contention as a sequence of interactions between citizens, information systems, civic networks, news organizations, and public authorities rather than as a simple function of internet access (Boulianne, 2020; Oser & Boulianne, 2020; Supriyanto, 2024).

The electoral cycle of 2024 supplies one starting point for this inquiry. Indonesia's national voter register contained more than 204.8 million eligible voters and substantial cohorts of citizens conventionally described as Generation Z and millennials. Their scale did not imply a single political identity or common preference, yet it elevated the significance of digital communication within electoral competition. Young citizens encountered political arguments through entertainment formats, recommendation systems, personal networks, and conventional news republished online. Those encounters could facilitate learning and scrutiny, but they also invited emotional framing, commercial targeting, and misleading content. Any analysis that celebrates digital access as democratic inclusion without examining the quality of information therefore misses the principal tension in platform-based citizenship.

The expansion of connectivity has been persistent. The Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association, known as APJII, reported national internet penetration of 79.50 percent in 2024, 80.66 percent in 2025, and 81.72 percent in 2026. These measurements describe access at the population level, not the proportion of citizens who engaged in politics, understood public policy, or enjoyed reliable broadband service. Their significance lies in demonstrating the enlarged infrastructure through which political narratives can circulate. At the same time, roughly one fifth of the population remained outside measured internet use in 2026, and substantial disparities persisted among regions and social groups. The resulting political opportunity structure combines extraordinary communicative reach with incomplete and unequal participation, an ambiguity central to the argument developed here.

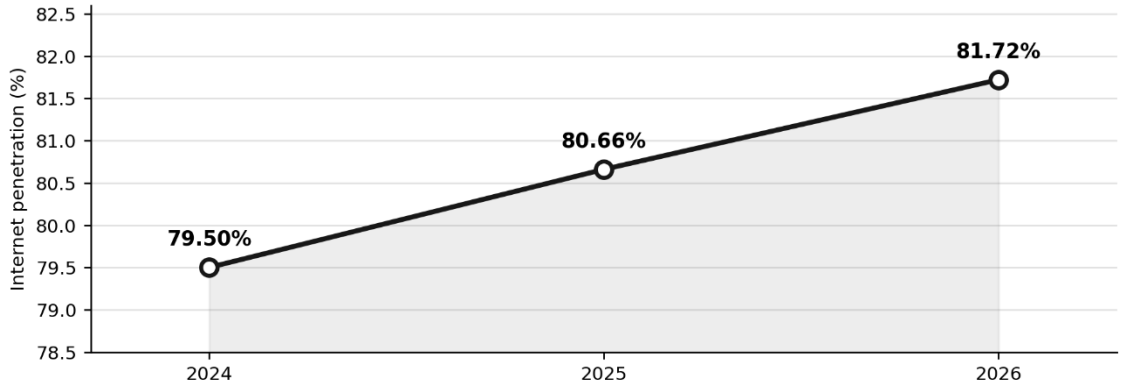


Figure 1. Internet penetration in Indonesia, 2024–2026
Source: APJII, Indonesia Internet Profile Survey (2024, 2025, 2026).

The immediate political context is equally important. Contentious debates around the 2024 electoral and regional election processes demonstrated that an image or slogan could compress complicated legal questions into accessible public language. In February 2025, students and activists protested under the broad #IndonesiaGelap label, linking concerns about fiscal choices and public welfare to a shared criticism of governance priorities. Public demonstrations in August 2025 then showed that mobilization did not cease with the election calendar. These episodes differed in their immediate triggers and organizational composition, but each involved interaction between online narration, public assembly, press coverage, and government response. They therefore provide a comparative setting in which to investigate recurring mechanisms without presuming that each protest had identical aims, participants, or outcomes.

Existing scholarship offers competing expectations. One perspective emphasizes the mobilizing potential of digital media: political information is easier to distribute, previously isolated citizens can discover one another, and personalized appeals reduce coordination costs. Another expects reinforcement rather than new participation, because already engaged individuals may be most likely to seek political content and interpret it as actionable. Research on political efficacy adds a third consideration by asking whether citizens believe they can act effectively and whether institutions will respond. These interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A digital movement may recruit some first-time participants, intensify participation among existing activists, and simultaneously exclude people without the resources required for sustained engagement. Evaluating the mechanism therefore requires attention to heterogeneous pathways and different kinds of evidence (Gray et al., 2020; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Amsalem & Zoizner, 2023).

The literature on digital public discourse also complicates a straightforward mobilization account. Platforms organize visibility through algorithms and affordances rather than providing neutral public meeting spaces. Campaign professionals, influencers, independent creators, and ordinary participants can use the same tools for very different purposes. Some messages encourage deliberation, while others spread manipulative narratives or reduce complicated disputes to identity conflict. The boundaries between advocacy, marketing, satire, and strategic deception may become difficult to recognize in a rapidly moving feed. Platformization can thus facilitate democratic contestation while simultaneously changing the evidentiary standards through which citizens judge arguments. The institutional value of online dissent depends partly on whether citizens and journalists can distinguish documented claims from emotive but unsupported assertions (Gray et al., 2020; Kreiss & McGregor, 2018; Bakir & McStay, 2018).

Indonesia is particularly instructive because digital contention intersects with an archipelagic geography and uneven civic infrastructure. Residents in major urban areas typically have more opportunities for campus networks, demonstrations, and press access than citizens living in remote settlements. Physical transport costs and the availability of independent organizations affect the conversion of online support into collective action. A rapidly shared hashtag can create the appearance of national unity even when its organized base is geographically concentrated. Conversely, digital connectivity can help local issues escape narrow administrative boundaries and acquire broader recognition. This duality makes the concept of inclusion more demanding than counting accounts, views, or impressions. The relevant question is who can participate,

whose grievances become legible, and who has an institutional route to obtain a response.

Empirical studies of Indonesian youth movements already document the relationship between networked communication and physical protest. Research on #ReformasiDikorupsi and #TolakOmnibusLaw shows that digital practices can interact with collective identity formation and offline participation. Subsequent analyses of #IndonesiaGelap illuminate the political meaning of networked grievances under a more recent administration. These studies are valuable but often focus on a single campaign, a particular platform, or a defined observation window. A broader comparison is warranted because mechanisms inferred from one hashtag may not generalize to movements with different policy demands and organizational structures. This article places these episodes within a shared analytical architecture while explicitly separating direct documentary evidence from interpretation and theoretical inference (Wahyuningroem et al., 2024; Arofah & Triwardani, 2025; Utami, 2026).

A second research gap concerns the distance between expressive participation and accountability. The literature frequently measures online participation by posting, commenting, liking, or sharing, whereas public accountability concerns the obligation of institutions to explain decisions and face meaningful scrutiny or correction. These activities occupy different points in a political process. Public expression can disclose grievances, raise reputational costs, and attract investigative attention, but it does not itself establish whether authorities supplied reasons, disclosed relevant information, revised policy, or created independent monitoring. A stronger analytical framework must specify the intermediate stages that connect online communication to democratic outputs, and the conditions under which that chain breaks. This is especially important when an episode involves emotional virality followed by institutional silence.

A third gap is methodological. Analyses of contemporary social-media protest frequently rely on observational data collected by platforms or private analytics companies, yet their denominators, collection rules, and deleted-content exclusions may be unclear. Claims about hashtag counts are not interchangeable with counts of unique participants. Likewise, a screenshot showing a political statement cannot identify its audience composition or verify its factual accuracy. Official electoral data, connectivity surveys, verified fact-check reports, and peer-reviewed case studies measure different dimensions. Their analytical value increases when researchers make those differences visible rather than combining them into a fictitious unified sample. The present study therefore uses a transparent documentary design and avoids extrapolating individual behavior from aggregate statistics.

The analytical proposition is that digitally mediated mobilization becomes consequential for democratic accountability only when five processes are sufficiently connected. First, grievances must be framed in ways that define an identifiable public problem. Second, the message must travel across distributed networks without losing its evidentiary foundation. Third, participants require a recognizable collective orientation that makes coordination plausible. Fourth, political expression must connect with forms of action capable of demanding a response, including assemblies, petitions, journalism, or civic monitoring. Fifth, institutions must provide observable feedback. These processes are theoretically separable, even though they overlap in practice. Their interaction explains why the same amount of online attention may be associated with different policy outcomes in different episodes (Hannan, 2018; Waisbord, 2018; Subekti et al., 2022).

The first research question asks how connectivity, generational electoral composition, and platform practices formed the structural conditions for youth mobilization from 2024 through 2026. The second asks which processes linked online narratives to offline contention in the selected cases. The third examines how disinformation and unequal resources complicated the production of informed participation. The fourth considers which observable institutional responses allow a cautious assessment of democratic accountability. These questions place political participation and governance within the same investigation, avoiding the assumption that rapid circulation of protest content is equivalent to sustained democratic change. The objective is explanatory comparison and framework development, not the estimation of a universal causal effect.

The article contributes in three respects. Empirically, it assembles comparable secondary evidence on a fast-changing Indonesian political setting without manufacturing respondent-level results. Conceptually, it distinguishes digital reach, mobilization, and accountability as related but nonidentical outcomes. Practically, it identifies safeguards that public bodies, civil society organizations, journalists, and platform operators can evaluate when responding to contentious political communication. The analysis also treats competing interpretations seriously: online solidarity can enhance coordination, but digital attention may reinforce preexisting political inequalities or encourage symbolic participation without follow-through. A careful interpretation should therefore combine the opportunities of platform-based organization with the institutional and informational conditions that limit it (Suniadewi & Abadi, 2025; Tan et al., 2024; Boulianne et al., 2020).

The remainder of the paper follows the logic of the research questions. The method section documents source selection, comparison units, coding logic, and limitations. The results begin with digital access and electoral demography before comparing mobilization episodes, information disorders, and online-to-offline mechanisms. Later sections interpret the accountability consequences of those processes and propose a conditional model of civic influence. Figures are newly drawn syntheses of reported observations and scholarly concepts; they are not copied reproductions of proprietary illustrations. Quantities are attributed to their originating organizations, while causal claims are deliberately calibrated to the observational character of the materials. Such separation between data and interpretation is essential for a credible analysis of an ongoing political development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This investigation adopts a qualitative comparative documentary design supported by descriptive secondary statistics. It examines the intersection of digital political participation and democratic accountability in Indonesia during the period 2024–2026. The units of comparison are public episodes rather than sampled individuals: controversy surrounding 2024 electoral governance, the February 2025 #IndonesiaGelap movement, and demonstrations reported in August 2025. Historical findings from youth movements in 2019–2020 are used as contextual theory-building evidence, not treated as additional contemporary cases. The documentary approach is suitable for reconstructing mechanisms from multiple kinds of public records, but it cannot establish the motivations of an entire generation or causal relationships at the individual level.

Selection of the three episodes follows a purposive, conceptually driven logic. Each occurred within the period surrounding or following the 2024 national election,

received substantial public discussion through digital channels, involved articulated claims about governance, and generated contemporaneous evidence from at least two independent source categories. The cases deliberately vary by policy issue and degree of organization. This variation assists examination of shared processes without assuming identical political objectives. Events were not selected because they produced a preferred political outcome; the design allows for partial, contested, or indeterminate accountability consequences. The bounded cases support analytical comparison rather than statistical representation of all Indonesian protests.

The source corpus combines four classes of material. Official records provide the voter-register denominator and demographic categories. APJII releases offer annual internet-use penetration estimates derived from its own survey methodology. Public statements and fact-checking documentation describe reported misinformation and platform-specific circulation during the election period. Peer-reviewed research and verified contemporary reporting provide accounts of the timing, framing, and participation dynamics of later protests. These are complementary sources rather than equivalent instruments: survey access rates cannot be treated as movement size, and a news account cannot substitute for a systematic participant interview. Explicit separation of evidence categories is maintained throughout the tables and captions.

Table 1. Secondary-Data Extraction And Verification Matrix

Evidence type	Analytical unit	Contribution to triangulation	Principal limitation
Official electoral records	2024 national voter register and cohorts	Demographic denominators and youth electorate	Administrative categories differ from behavioral measures
Internet access surveys	APJII penetration 2024–2026	Digital opportunity and access changes	Access is not participation or influence
Research publications	Peer-reviewed Indonesian case studies	Process interpretation and mechanism comparison	Different sampling and publication windows
Public verification records	Official misinformation tallies and event reports	Claim corroboration and event chronology	Reporting and platform-detection bias

Source: Authors' methodological design; APJII, KPU, 2026

A structured extraction sheet was used to record publication date, reporting organization, geographical coverage, population or content unit, available numeric measures, key political issue, relevant actors, reported protest actions, and any documented institutional response. Where multiple sources mentioned an event, comparison was directed to its verifiable core: the occurrence of the episode, the existence of a public demand, and the presence or absence of evidence for a government response. Evaluative statements made by campaign organizers, public authorities, or commentators were treated as attributed claims, not automatically accepted as

established facts. This procedure reduces the risk of presenting partisan interpretation as measurement.

The literature sample was assembled from articles published during 2016–2026 in international journals addressing digital participation, collective action, political communication, disinformation, media literacy, and political efficacy. Three relevant contributions were included from the publicly accessible International Journal of Social and Political Sciences archive, according to the specified journal requirement. Relevance was defined by contribution to an explanatory mechanism rather than geographic similarity alone. Thus, comparative research outside Indonesia was used to clarify plausible processes, whereas case-specific factual claims rested on Indonesian records and studies. The bibliography contains forty journal publications; government reports and contemporaneous news items are documented separately as data provenance rather than counted toward the journal-reference target.

The coding scheme includes six dimensions: infrastructure and access; issue framing; network diffusion; coordination between online and offline settings; information integrity; and institutional response. First-cycle codes distinguished directly described observations, attributed interpretations, quantitative measures, and theoretical propositions. Second-cycle comparison searched for recurring sequences, enabling conditions, and interruption points. For example, the appearance of protest-related hashtags was coded as network diffusion, while a documented demonstration was coded as offline action. A claim that an institution altered policy required evidence of an identifiable decision or formal action; public attention alone was not sufficient. This preserves the difference between civic pressure and demonstrated policy effectiveness.

Methodological triangulation involved checking important descriptions against more than one type of source when feasible and placing contradictory figures side by side rather than forcing agreement. The voter-generation figures illustrate the problem: original published counts and accompanying percentages do not always share a mathematically consistent denominator. The paper reports the underlying numbers and calculates a transparent share from the national total where appropriate. APJII year-to-year penetration estimates are discussed as survey indicators that may reflect methodological differences alongside real changes in access. Accordingly, no significance tests, correlation coefficients, confidence intervals, or regressions are generated from insufficient aggregate observations. Precision is restricted to the level justified by the source.

Case evidence was read through a process-oriented rather than outcome-only approach. The analysis asks which public problem was articulated, how it circulated, whether organizations or networks bridged digital and physical activities, what forms of public response became visible, and whether any durable accountability mechanism could be traced. These stages are diagnostic categories and should not be mistaken for a deterministic model in which a hashtag automatically causes an official decision. Counterexamples include prominent online narratives that are not followed by organizational capacity and public demonstrations that secure attention without measurable follow-through. The design encourages consideration of such alternative interpretations instead of attributing all consequences to social media.

The figures are original analytical visualizations. The introductory graph plots three APJII penetration percentages without imputing unreported years. A result-section figure reorganizes published platform-level counts for election-related misinformation, retaining their original reporting window and denominator. The remaining diagrams are

author-developed adaptations of theoretical relations examined in international journal articles and Indonesian case studies. They encode documentary relationships, not estimates of hidden social networks. No social-media scraping, direct surveys, focus-group discussions, new interviews, human-subject experiments, or undisclosed observation were conducted for this manuscript. This clarification is necessary because secondary reanalysis must not be presented as firsthand fieldwork.

The study's ethical stance follows its public-document scope. No private messages, personal identifiers, or nonpublic activist information are collected or reproduced. Potentially stigmatizing accusations are discussed as claims circulating in the information environment rather than restated as established wrongdoing. The analysis avoids naming individual protesters as targets of scrutiny and does not equate political disagreement with misinformation. Publicly available materials may still contain errors, selective framing, or retrospective interpretation; each is evaluated in light of provenance and independently corroborated context. The appropriate standard is not the impossible elimination of interpretive uncertainty but the transparent management of that uncertainty.

Several limitations govern the interpretation of findings. First, the evidence is heterogeneous, and its sources did not employ common sampling designs or observation windows. Second, digital platforms change rapidly, so interface features and moderation practices observed in one episode may not persist. Third, reporting intensity differs by city and issue, creating visibility bias. Fourth, the study cannot distinguish how many demonstrators were mobilized by online messages rather than preexisting organizations or interpersonal communication. Finally, the available record through November 2026 may not reveal longer-term institutional consequences. These limitations prevent population-wide generalization, while leaving room for careful mechanism analysis anchored in identifiable public records (Amsalem & Nir, 2021; Dommett & Power, 2019; Oser & Boulianne, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Expanding Digital Access and Persistent Inequality

The first finding concerns the distinction between a growing digital public and a democratically inclusive one. APJII's annual penetration series rises from 79.50 percent in 2024 to 80.66 percent in 2025 and 81.72 percent in 2026. The increase between the two endpoints is 2.22 percentage points; it is not a 2.22 percent relative change, and it does not mean that every additional user entered political debate. The series shows that the basic infrastructure for large-scale diffusion became more extensive across the study window. Yet the remaining gap is substantial, and the measured population includes people whose access is intermittent, shared through devices, or primarily oriented toward livelihood and entertainment. The data therefore support an opportunity claim, not a direct participation claim.

The 2026 survey reported approximately 235.26 million internet users nationally. This figure illustrates the possible audience for platform-mediated communication, but should not be converted into a pool of active political participants. Many people encounter politics passively through feeds or messaging applications; others are highly attentive but unwilling to post because public expression can carry social costs. Within the same national user total, information practices vary according to age, language, economic resources, disability, education, and geographical location. Any estimate of political mobilization built simply by multiplying the total user count by an assumed

engagement rate would conceal these variations and create false precision. An analytically defensible comparison must retain the distance between access, attention, expression, and consequential action.

At the regional level, the APJII 2026 reporting showed notably uneven penetration, including relatively lower figures in eastern island groups than in the main urbanized and economically connected corridors. This pattern matters because geographic inequalities shape not only the capacity to receive digital messages but also the opportunities to verify them and participate in public assemblies. A citizen can recognize a national issue through a low-bandwidth connection while lacking local transport, civic organization, or independent news coverage. Conversely, a highly connected metropolitan student may move quickly from a campus discussion to a demonstration at a national institution. The same hashtag therefore represents differing opportunity structures across Indonesian territory. National penetration should be treated as an average that masks politically meaningful distributional differences.

The relevant inequality is multidimensional rather than exclusively technical. Financial costs affect data consumption and device quality, schooling influences the capacity to evaluate contested information, and organizational resources determine whether a complaint reaches a decision maker. Citizens with reliable connections may still face weak external political efficacy if they perceive government institutions as inaccessible. Similarly, social-media visibility can privilege fluent users who master platform conventions, visual formats, and amplification tactics. These asymmetries challenge the optimistic claim that digital communication erases conventional hierarchies in public politics. Technologies may lower certain entry costs while leaving other forms of inequality intact or even intensifying them as politically experienced actors become more efficient at attracting attention (Mohamed et al., 2026; Facciani et al., 2023; Boulianne et al., 2020).

Table 2. Expansion of internet access in Indonesia, 2024–2026

Indicator	Year	Reported value	Interpretive caution
Internet penetration	2024	79.50%	Digital access base
Internet penetration	2025	80.66%	Increase of 1.16 percentage points
Internet penetration	2026	81.72%	Increase of 1.06 percentage points
Estimated users	2026	235,261,078	National internet-user estimate

Source: APJII Internet Profile Survey reports, 2024–2026

The documentary evidence also suggests that a purely technological account mistakes a channel for an institution. A messaging service may enable rapid communication, but it does not provide a reliable public record of contested government commitments. A short-video platform may expose a policy controversy to millions, but its interface is not designed to archive legislative reasoning or trace administrative implementation. Conversely, official websites may contain formal decisions yet fail to communicate them in formats accessible to younger citizens. The gap between communicative reach and institutional transparency is thus a governance design problem. Effective accountability requires links between platforms and durable

information repositories that allow public demands, official reasons, and subsequent actions to be examined over time.

This distinction also changes how apparent progress should be evaluated. Increased internet penetration can reasonably be interpreted as an enabling development, but it cannot establish improvements in civic competence, deliberative quality, or participation equality. A rise in online controversy might reflect heightened democratic vigilance, intensified polarization, or the greater prominence of automated and coordinated messaging. Without separating these mechanisms, analysts risk attributing every increase in political conversation to growing democratic maturity. The appropriate conclusion is conditional: Indonesia's expanded internet infrastructure enlarged the capacity for collective communication during 2024–2026, but the political implications depended on how information was produced, whether participation was socially distributed, and what institutional channels were available to receive public criticism.

The access dimension therefore establishes the outer boundary of the cases rather than their full explanation. It clarifies why the same period can exhibit both intense digital dissent and persistent barriers to representative voice. It also indicates why public authorities cannot assume that monitoring prominent hashtags is equivalent to hearing the Indonesian population. A geographically balanced understanding requires attention to less visible grievances, local-language communication, offline hearings, and citizens who use the internet without engaging in public political content. The democratic challenge is not simply to connect the remaining population, but to make the connected political arena more accountable, verifiable, and open to voices with unequal ability to capture attention.

2. The Young Electorate and the Participation Problem

The second finding emerges from the generational composition of the 2024 voter register. KPU's published distribution reported 46,800,161 Generation Z voters and 66,822,389 millennials. Together these categories represented 113,622,550 registered citizens, a large segment of the official 204,807,222-person electorate. Their combined numbers are analytically important because parties, campaign professionals, students, and news outlets all had incentives to address these cohorts. The figures do not prove that young people are politically homogeneous or that every millennial shares the same digital practices as adolescents entering their first election. They instead establish the magnitude of a constituency whose interests, grievances, and communication preferences could not be dismissed as marginal.

A data-quality qualification is necessary. Public commentary frequently repeats a combined youth share of 56.45 percent, obtained by adding the separately published percentages of 33.60 and 22.85. Yet dividing the published combined headcount of 113,622,550 by the official national register of 204,807,222 gives approximately 55.48 percent. The discrepancy is not evidence of electoral manipulation; it indicates that circulated tabulations require denominator checking before being presented as precise statistics. This study preserves the underlying registered counts and identifies the calculated proportion explicitly rather than reproducing inconsistent figures without comment. The example illustrates why critical data literacy is relevant not only to misinformation users but also to researchers and policy communicators.

Generational size is often mistakenly equated with political power. Electoral weight provides potential leverage during campaigns, but meaningful representation also

depends on issue articulation, organizational coordination, and opportunities to evaluate policy alternatives. An individual may be a frequent consumer of political videos without being able to name the responsible institution for a public service. Another may attend demonstrations while remaining skeptical that representatives will respond. Empirical work on Indonesian voters documents the coexistence of identity-based appeals, pragmatic calculations, digital campaign techniques, and conventional sociopolitical ties. These overlapping motivations make it inappropriate to classify all young voters as either detached or digitally radical. The observable pattern is diversity within a politically consequential age cohort.

Table 3. Young Voters in The 2024 Indonesian Electoral Register

Electorate category	Year	Voters / share	Calculation note
Generation Z	2024	46,800,161	Official KPU generational category
Millennial	2024	66,822,389	Official KPU generational category
Combined youth cohorts	2024	113,622,550	Arithmetic sum of the two cohorts
National electoral register	2024	204,807,222	DPT voter denominator
Calculated cohort share	2024	55.48%	113,622,550 / 204,807,222 × 100

Source: KPU public voter information; 55.48%.

Studies of Generation Z information preferences further suggest that communication formats influence how citizens first encounter political issues. Research from West Java reported that respondents frequently drew information from online sources and displayed diverse preferences for political discussion, creating both opportunities for accessible civic education and challenges for systematic verification. This does not establish a universal preference among Indonesia's entire youth population. The study's regional sample and survey design limit that inference. Nonetheless, the result aligns with the wider observation that platform-distributed content cannot be ignored when public actors seek to explain policy. The design of accessible political communication should address accuracy, context, and opportunities for questioning claims, rather than concentrating exclusively on popularity or entertainment value (Dewi et al., 2025; Amsalem & Nir, 2021; Suniadewi & Abadi, 2025).

The relationship between youth and political expression also varies over an individual's life course. Younger participants may have limited financial resources but substantial digital familiarity; older millennials may possess greater workplace or community networks alongside family responsibilities that constrain protest attendance. Students may use campus organizations to lower coordination costs, whereas workers and geographically isolated citizens may rely on other associations. The same online slogan can therefore be translated into distinct political practices depending on available time, identity, and social infrastructure. A generational analysis that ignores these internal differences risks replacing conventional elite-centered narratives with another overly simplified demographic stereotype. What matters is how particular groups transform shared concerns into credible public demands.

Electoral political participation and protest participation should likewise be distinguished. Registering to vote is a formal right exercised through an administrative system; joining a demonstration or digitally criticizing a decision uses different

organizational resources and involves different risks. Digital campaigns can connect these practices by making electoral promises objects of later scrutiny, but there is no reason to assume that the same people dominate both activities. The 2024 election is therefore better understood as a formative context for subsequent mobilization than as an explanation that automatically determines it. Post-election accountability depends on citizens continuing to request explanations from institutions after campaign incentives have diminished.

Consequently, the youth dimension contributes to a process-centered rather than demographic determinist model. The large registered cohort helps explain why online political arguments were salient, but the explanatory work lies in connecting voter experiences, issue awareness, emotional interpretation, and network-based coordination. Individual political efficacy can enhance the willingness to act, while perceptions of institutional responsiveness influence whether action is viewed as worthwhile. This distinction is consistent with comparative evidence that the association between digital activity and participation may reflect established political interest as much as newly generated mobilization. Indonesia's data invite inquiry into these mechanisms, but aggregate age proportions alone cannot resolve their relative contribution (Boulianne et al., 2023; Oser et al., 2022; Boulianne, 2020).

3. Three Episodes of Digital Political Contention

The third finding concerns continuity and variation across political episodes. The 2024 electoral environment made digital campaigning and contestation highly visible, while debates surrounding the regional election law demonstrated the significance of rapid public communication beyond candidate promotion. The public symbol often described as the blue emergency-warning image became a recognizable shorthand for concern about electoral rules. Its communicative efficiency came from concentrating a technical institutional dispute into a portable image that could be redistributed by accounts with different levels of political expertise. That simplicity increased reach, but it also placed a burden on journalists and civic organizations to restore legal context. The episode illustrates framing as the first bridge from technical governance disputes to mass public recognition.

The presence of recognizable symbols does not by itself identify the movement's organizers or explain legislative outcomes. Civic associations, political opposition, student networks, journalists, and ordinary citizens may converge temporarily around a shared concern while retaining different long-term goals. The documentary record indicates that public protests accompanied controversy over proposed election-law changes in August 2024 and that legislative plans were subsequently shelved. The temporal proximity is relevant but not sufficient for a single-factor causal claim. Parliamentary calculation, constitutional constraints, media scrutiny, and coordinated offline pressure also mattered. A careful interpretation regards digital circulation as part of a wider constellation of public accountability mechanisms, rather than as an isolated source of institutional correction.

The February 2025 #IndonesiaGelap mobilization illustrates a different form of issue aggregation. Its slogan condensed several concerns about public spending, education, social support, and political priorities into a broad negative assessment of the national situation. Reuters reported student-led demonstrations in multiple cities and documented the prominence of the slogan on social media. The label's usefulness came partly from its breadth: diverse grievances could find a common symbolic home without

requiring immediate agreement on every policy detail. Yet such breadth can also complicate negotiations because officials may respond selectively to one demand while ignoring others. The episode therefore shows how framing supports coalition formation and simultaneously introduces difficulties for defining measurable accountability outcomes.

The geography of the February demonstrations is important to the interpretation of networked mobilization. Reports identified activity in multiple locations, indicating that political communication was not confined to a single campus or city. However, geographic spread should not be interpreted as evidence that the movement represented the entire national population. The intensity of reported assemblies varied, and the available documentary sources do not provide a consistently sampled national attendance total. Nor can they determine which participants first encountered the movement online and which were recruited through preexisting organizations. The reliable inference is narrower but still meaningful: online framing and offline assembly coexisted and reinforced a publicly recognizable protest identity across more than one urban context.

A peer-reviewed analysis published in 2025 examined #IndonesiaGelap as a form of digital political protest, while later network research investigated interactions among Instagram, TikTok, and X during the February 2025 period. The existence of these studies matters because their underlying observations extend beyond the media attention generated by the protests themselves. They provide methodological examples for distinguishing framing, network relations, and participation processes. Nevertheless, their specific samples remain bounded by platform, time, and data availability. This article therefore draws on their conceptual insights without claiming to have rerun their networks, reproduced their proprietary data, or validated additional participant counts. Conceptual adaptation is not a substitute for original raw-data access (Arofah & Triwardani, 2025; Utami, 2026; Wahyuningroem et al., 2024).



Figure 2. Comparison Of Selected Indonesian Political Contention Episodes
Source: Original Author, 2026

Demonstrations in August 2025 then revealed a shift from budget-focused criticism toward a more complex conjunction of political dissatisfaction, parliamentary privilege, public anger, and demands for accountability. Contemporaneous coverage described protests across multiple locations and serious tensions in the streets. The episode demonstrates how digitally connected grievances may become interwoven with rapid events that change the emotional character and urgency of a movement. Under such conditions, political messages circulate through a hybrid environment of social platforms, television reporting, online newspapers, and interpersonal networks. A single-platform explanation becomes inadequate because the movement's meaning is repeatedly reframed as new incidents, official responses, and eyewitness materials appear.

The August case also cautions against representing all circulating material as trustworthy evidence. Unverified recordings, selective clips, and misleading claims can travel alongside authentic documentation. Strong emotions and high public attention increase incentives for manipulation by actors whose objectives need not correspond to protesters' stated demands. It follows that identifying the diffusion of a particular slogan tells little about whether every attached narrative was accurate. The responsible researcher separates an observed demonstration from claims about its causes, organizers, and consequences, each of which requires different evidence. The analysis similarly avoids attributing wrongdoing to named persons without independent confirmation or treating reports of isolated incidents as a description of all participants.

Comparing the episodes reveals a recurring sequence without imposing an artificial uniformity. A public grievance was translated into accessible symbols or slogans; communication networks amplified those expressions; existing organizations and informal relationships connected participants; physical assemblies or institutional scrutiny followed; and government actors faced demands for explanation or revision. The sequence was neither inevitable nor equally completed in each case. Electoral-law controversy had a comparatively identifiable procedural target, whereas broad social and economic grievances generated more diffuse expectations. A model that merely records whether a protest became large would miss this difference in institutional addressability. The clarity of the demanded action influences what later observers can reasonably count as a response.

Table 4. Comparative episode matrix for digital-to-offline political mobilization

Episode	Primary grievance framing	Documented form of contention	Evidence / outcome boundary
August 2024	Electoral-law controversy	Online criticism and collective assembly	Legal-process visibility; no automatic policy attribution
February 2025	#IndonesiaGelap; governance and welfare	Networked campaign plus campus demonstrations	Attention and public debate; outcomes require separate tracking
August 2025	Representation and public accountability	Distributed online framing and demonstrations	Responses vary by issue, actor and period

Source: Authors' qualitative comparison of published Indonesian case studies and corroborated public event reporting, 2024–2026.

Several alternative explanations remain plausible. A national controversy may appear to move from hashtags to demonstrations while both developments actually arise from the same underlying political decision. Civic leaders may have planned offline assemblies before a symbol became viral. Political parties or news organizations may amplify an existing campaign after they judge it newsworthy. Conversely, extensive digital visibility may attract people who were not previously connected to activists. These possibilities are compatible with the documentary evidence and should be tested through future process-tracing interviews or time-stamped interaction data. The present

comparison identifies observable links, not a definitive causal ordering between every online message and every offline action.

The cases also differ in how they allow accountability to be assessed. A procedural challenge to a legislative proposal may have a discrete observable outcome, such as withdrawal, postponement, or formal reconsideration. Public criticism of budget priorities requires examining appropriations, service consequences, and official explanations over a longer period. Protests involving public security and the treatment of demonstrators raise additional questions about independent investigation and institutional responsibility. These distinct evaluative standards prevent an analytically misleading comparison based only on the number of posts or protesters. The common principle is that effectiveness must be defined by the public claim and the government institution with authority to answer it (Subekti et al., 2025; Waisbord, 2018).

4. Information Disorder and the Reliability of Political Claims

The fourth finding concerns the role of information integrity in shaping political judgment. During the 2024 election period, the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Informatics reported handling 203 distinct election-related hoax issues and 2,882 associated pieces of distributed digital content as of early January 2024. The numerical distinction is fundamental: an issue identifies a false claim or narrative, whereas content counts appearances or distributions on particular platforms. Treating the two figures as alternative estimates of the same object would exaggerate uncertainty and obscure the actual reporting structure. Their relationship instead indicates that individual misleading narratives can be replicated across multiple channels, often in formats designed for rapid attention.

The ministry's platform breakdown was 1,325 Facebook contents, 947 on X, 342 on TikTok, 198 on Instagram, 36 on SnackVideo, and 34 on YouTube. These entries sum to the reported 2,882 content items. The counts describe recorded ministry handling activity in a specific reporting window; they are neither estimates of all circulating misinformation nor exposure rates for individual users. Their distribution shows why cross-platform monitoring matters and why a campaign's apparent dominance on one application should not be generalized to the information ecosystem. Differences in platform architecture, user behavior, detection procedures, and moderation may affect observed counts independently of actual misinformation prevalence.

False political narratives can distort not only candidate reputations but also perceptions of electoral fairness and government legitimacy. A misleading claim about a public decision may be amplified because it confirms existing suspicions, generates outrage, or seems to originate from a trusted community member. Corrections often confront a different incentive structure: factual explanations are slower, more detailed, and less emotionally rewarding than provocative content. Visual edits and decontextualized clips add difficulty because viewers must assess the source, timing, and meaning of an image rather than simply read a statement. An accountability movement that tolerates weak verification may therefore undermine the public credibility necessary to demand truthful explanations from institutions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Benaissa Pedriza, 2021; Cano-Orón et al., 2021).

Information disorder is not confined to ordinary users. Organized campaigns, commercial intermediaries, and politically motivated actors can exploit targeting systems and the opacity of online distribution. Paid advertisements may reach narrow audience segments that are difficult for outsiders to observe, while coordinated repetition can

make a claim appear more socially widespread than it is. Such mechanisms complicate the relationship between apparent public opinion and demonstrable public participation. They also create a methodological problem for researchers who interpret engagement metrics as evidence of genuine consensus. A responsible study should distinguish authenticated citizen communication from strategically manufactured amplification where evidence permits, while withholding allegations about specific actors when attribution remains uncertain (Kim et al., 2018; Lukito, 2020; Woolley & Howard, 2016).

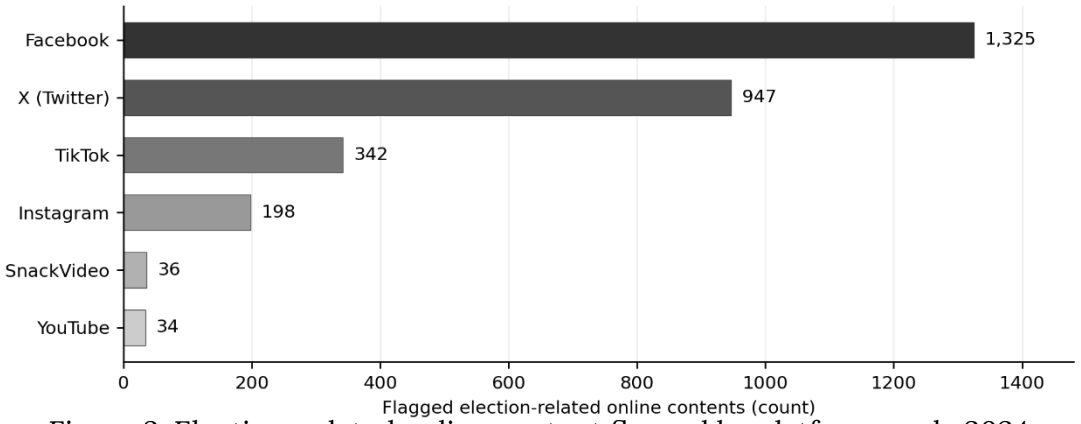


Figure 2. Election-related online content flagged by platform, early 2024
Source: Author, 2026

The problem extends beyond whether a particular claim is false. Selective presentation of accurate information can still create distorted impressions when material context is omitted. A legitimate protest may circulate alongside manipulated content, and an authentic government statement may be framed so that its qualifications disappear. Polarized audiences may respond by rejecting all unfavorable information as propaganda. In this environment, the democratic function of fact-checking requires transparent methods, accessible primary documents, and opportunities to correct errors. Civic groups can improve their standing by publishing sources for key demands and correcting misinformation that appears to favor their own side, rather than applying verification only to political opponents (Dan et al., 2021; Rossini et al., 2021; Pérez-Curiel & Rivas-de-Roca, 2022).

The comparative evidence consequently supports a quality condition for digital accountability. Grievance framing helps citizens recognize a problem, but the resulting campaign is more capable of sustained scrutiny when claims can be traced to laws, budgets, public statements, and authenticated events. Where that traceability is absent, institutions may dismiss legitimate grievances by pointing to unrelated online falsehoods. The corrective strategy is not to suppress contentious speech as a whole; it is to strengthen verification practices while protecting the right to criticize public policy. Media literacy, independent fact-checking, open official records, and platform transparency address different parts of the same accountability challenge (Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019; Shin et al., 2017; Mauk & Grömping, 2024).

5. Mechanisms Connecting Digital Expression to Collective Action

The fifth finding identifies the mechanisms through which digital dissent can become collective action. The first mechanism is diagnostic framing: an event acquires political meaning when participants describe the problem, identify the responsible

decision or institution, and present a reason for public concern. A short hashtag is effective when it makes the grievance recognizable across networks, but recognition alone does not establish agreement over policy remedies. The second mechanism is distributed amplification, in which participants and intermediaries recirculate the message through different formats and audiences. The third involves identity and solidarity, allowing individuals to recognize that others share their concerns. These mechanisms explain the early growth of contention without requiring a centralized organization from the outset.

A fourth mechanism is the connection between digital visibility and practical coordination. Meetings, transport, legal assistance, safety information, organizational endorsements, and agreed protest locations require resources beyond a trending topic. Student associations, labor groups, civic coalitions, and local networks may perform this bridging role even when public discourse celebrates spontaneous collective action. The fifth mechanism is institutional addressability: a movement must identify the authority capable of responding and define what would count as an adequate response. Without such articulation, participation can remain emotionally intense but institutionally diffuse. These five mechanisms should be treated as a chain with possible feedback loops and interruption points, not as an automatic progression in which every viral campaign culminates in reform.

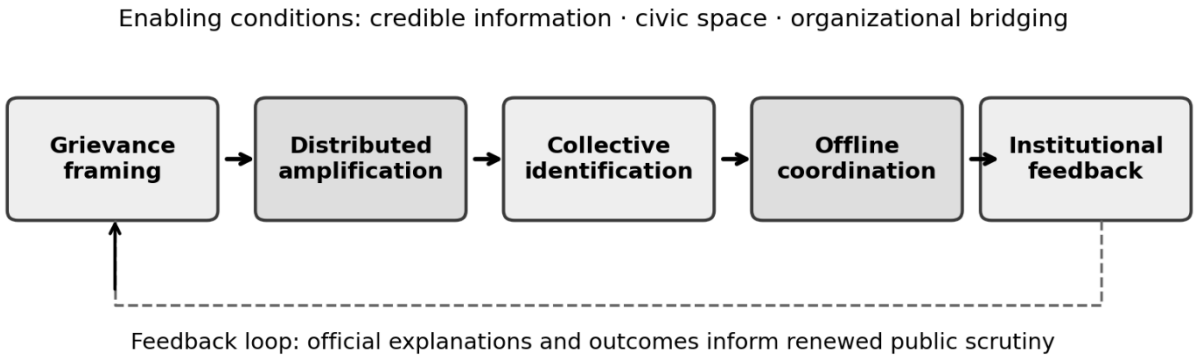


Figure 3. Conditional pathway from digital dissent to democratic scrutiny
Source: Original conceptual framework informed by Oser and Boulianne (2020), Boulianne et al. (2023), and Wahyuningroem et al. (2024).

The online-to-offline relationship is especially difficult to establish causally because participation and digital engagement may reinforce each other. A committed activist may post more after joining a demonstration, while a previously inactive citizen may attend because a message appeared in a social feed. Repeated-wave research finds strong grounds for considering the reinforcement pathway and cautions against assuming that digital exposure is always the starting cause. Contemporary Indonesian episodes likely contain both patterns, but their relative frequencies cannot be calculated from public records alone. The documentary comparison is therefore best read as a mechanism map that identifies plausible transitions and necessary organizational resources, rather than as a measurement of the proportion of participants newly mobilized online (Oser et al., 2022; Boulianne et al., 2023; Hannan, 2018).

Political efficacy functions as an important interpretive bridge. People may understand a grievance and agree with a hashtag but decline to act if they believe participation is dangerous, ineffective, or disconnected from institutions that hold

decision-making authority. Others may join because they expect collective action to attract public attention even when immediate reform is unlikely. Internal efficacy concerns perceived capacity to understand and undertake political action, whereas external efficacy concerns perceived responsiveness of public institutions. The distinction is consequential for policy: civic education may improve participants' knowledge, but only transparent and reasoned institutional feedback can demonstrate that participation is being taken seriously. Both dimensions are needed for durable democratic engagement.

Movement durability also depends on temporal organization. Short-lived bursts of attention can help signal urgency, yet subsequent policy monitoring often requires slower practices such as reading regulations, comparing budget versions, attending hearings, and documenting official follow-through. These tasks are less visible than a viral video but more closely related to accountability. The process involves translating a broad emotional frame into specific, trackable claims while maintaining room for disagreement within the coalition. Overly rigid organizational control may reduce the flexibility that made a campaign inclusive, whereas complete decentralization can leave no actor responsible for evaluating results. The practical challenge is a form of organizational bridging that sustains coordination without erasing the diversity of participants.

The mechanism framework also identifies points at which mobilization can fail. A grievance may never move beyond personal frustration; an accessible frame may be overwhelmed by false claims; online diffusion may not reach organizations with offline capacity; a demonstration may lack a clear institutional addressee; or authorities may acknowledge the protest without disclosing any substantive response. Conversely, activity may continue through less visible legal advocacy or local deliberation after a hashtag stops trending. Evaluating the movement solely by the duration of social-media attention therefore underestimates some outcomes and exaggerates others. Process-based observation captures the distinction between symbolic expression, organized civic pressure, and documented public accountability (Hansen & Lim, 2019; Subekti et al., 2022; Supriyanto, 2024).

6. Institutional Feedback and Democratic Accountability

The sixth finding is that democratic accountability is a more demanding outcome than public attention or an official statement. A government institution may acknowledge that a protest occurred while withholding reasons for the underlying policy. It may publish a clarification without changing the challenged measure, or it may revise one component while leaving other demands unaddressed. These responses have different meanings and should not be placed in a single category of success. Accountability is stronger when citizens can identify who made a decision, inspect the evidence or legal basis, ask questions through established channels, and observe whether commitments are subsequently implemented. The existence of a digital campaign is only one possible trigger within this broader institutional sequence.

The contrast among the selected cases makes the importance of measurable targets clear. A dispute concerning a legislative proposal has an identifiable decision pathway and may generate verifiable documentary changes. Criticism of fiscal priorities can require longitudinal analysis of appropriations, implementation, and service effects. Protests about public security and state conduct raise additional requirements for investigation, disclosure, and impartial review. Those processes operate on different timelines and involve different authorities. It would be inappropriate to rank the episodes

by a single success score derived from public visibility. Instead, the accountability test must specify the relevant institution, expected decision, evidence needed to verify implementation, and period during which the response can reasonably be observed.

Institutional responses can also shape future mobilization even when they do not resolve an immediate grievance. Reasoned explanations may establish a public record that citizens can challenge using additional evidence. Dismissive communication can deepen perceived distance between decision makers and affected communities. Ambiguous promises create difficulties for accountability because the public lacks a stable benchmark for judging completion. These patterns suggest that official communication is itself part of political governance, rather than merely public relations after a demonstration. Open records, clear timelines, and accessible channels for follow-up can convert episodic confrontation into continuing scrutiny. Such arrangements do not require agreement with every protest demand; they require explanations and review procedures that can be evaluated.

The media ecosystem affects which grievances officials must confront. National reporting can bring attention to an issue originating in one location, but editorial selection and platform engagement may privilege dramatic incidents over prolonged administrative problems. This raises a risk that institutions respond to the most visible story rather than the most consequential underlying harm. Public authorities should therefore avoid using trending lists as substitutes for representative consultation, and civil society organizations should not assume that online popularity proves universal consent. Connecting digital feedback with parliamentary hearings, independent oversight, local complaint systems, and accessible policy documents can mitigate this imbalance. The purpose is to make public criticism both visible and institutionally usable (Subekti et al., 2025; Dommett & Power, 2019).

A useful accountability assessment distinguishes four levels of observable response. The first is recognition, such as an official acknowledging the issue. The second is explanation, involving public release of reasons or relevant records. The third is corrective action, shown by identifiable revision, enforcement, review, or resource allocation. The fourth is follow-through, established through implementation evidence and opportunities for independent scrutiny. These are analytical categories developed for this study, not empirically measured national indices. A movement may obtain recognition while failing to secure correction, or achieve a procedural review whose effects remain uncertain. Separating the levels prevents celebratory or dismissive claims that cannot be supported by the documentary record.

The accountability framework also helps clarify the role of democratic safeguards. Independent journalism and fact-checking support the reliability of public claims, while transparent administrative processes make official decisions inspectable. Universities and civic organizations provide spaces for discussion and verification. Protection of peaceful civic activity makes it possible to convert public concern into lawful collective action without disproportionate personal risk. Where these safeguards weaken, digital participation may remain technically possible but politically constrained. The central analytical implication is that platform innovation cannot compensate for absent institutional checks. Democratic accountability is produced through relationships among information quality, civic freedom, organizational resources, and governmental obligations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how digital dissent, youth political mobilization, and demands for democratic accountability interacted in Indonesia between 2024 and 2026. Descriptive public records show a growing internet-connected population and a large youth electorate, while documentary comparison identifies repeated connections among grievance framing, online circulation, collective identity, offline mobilization, and institutional response. These mechanisms were evident across distinct controversies, although their specific forms varied with the issues and organizational contexts involved. The findings do not support the proposition that a hashtag, by itself, produces a policy change. Digital attention instead represents a potentially important but incomplete component of a wider accountability process.

The central contribution is a conditional framework that separates political visibility from political influence. Online communication may lower barriers to recognition and coordination, yet those advantages are limited by information disorder, digital inequality, uneven organizational resources, and uncertain governmental responsiveness. Accountability becomes more observable when demands identify responsible institutions and can be linked to documented explanations, corrective action, and follow-through. The comparative evidence also cautions against a single narrative of technological emancipation or inevitable manipulation. Both enabling and constraining dynamics can operate within the same movement, and their balance must be established empirically rather than assumed from platform metrics.

Practical implications follow from this distinction. Public institutions should publish accessible policy records and time-bound responses to substantive grievances; civic organizations should preserve evidence and communicate specific objectives; and educational institutions should integrate public-data literacy with critical digital media skills. Journalists and fact-checkers have a complementary role in evaluating contested content without dismissing legitimate protest as inherently unreliable. These measures would improve the conditions under which digitally expressed criticism can produce sustained public scrutiny, although they cannot guarantee agreement between citizens and government on every political question. The analysis is limited to secondary documents, aggregate statistics, and published case research. It does not report original surveys, interviews, social-media scraping, or a causal estimate of protest participation. Differences in reporting coverage, platform availability, and follow-up periods constrain comparisons, especially when policy consequences emerge slowly. Future work should triangulate participant-level data with verified event sequences and formal records of institutional response across multiple Indonesian regions.

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