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The Crisis of Trust in Democratic Institutions: Populism, Post-Truth Politics, and the Erosion of Social Capital as Threats to Civil Society Cohesion in Contemporary Political Systems

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary crisis of democratic trust represents one of the most consequential political transformations of the twenty-first century. Across established and emerging democracies alike, public confidence in democratic institutions—parliaments, judiciaries, electoral commissions, political parties, and mainstream media—has declined precipitously, creating conditions of democratic fragility that are being systematically exploited by populist political entrepreneurs and accelerated by the epistemic disruptions of post-truth information ecosystems. This article examines the multidimensional dynamics of institutional trust erosion in contemporary political systems, with particular attention to the Indonesian case, through an integrative theoretical framework that synthesizes Robert Putnam's social capital theory, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's populism studies, and Hannah Arendt's political theory of truth, deception, and the public sphere. Drawing upon systematic review of empirical literature and secondary institutional trust survey data, the study identifies three interrelated mechanisms through which populism and post-truth politics erode the social capital foundations of civil society: (1) the delegitimation of epistemic authority, wherein the systematic dissemination of misinformation and the discrediting of expert and institutional knowledge undermine the shared factual reality upon which democratic deliberation depends; (2) the tribalization of political identity, wherein populist Manichaean narratives of 'pure people' versus 'corrupt elite' intensify bonding social capital within partisan communities while eroding the bridging capital that enables cross-cleavage democratic solidarity; and (3) the platformization of political affect, wherein social media algorithms structurally prioritize emotionally activating content over factually accurate information, producing self-reinforcing cycles of outrage, distrust, and political withdrawal. The Indonesian case, characterized by the interplay of democratic consolidation, Islamic political mobilization, digital media penetration, and oligarchic power dynamics, provides a particularly illuminating empirical context for these theoretical arguments. The findings carry significant implications for theories of democratic resilience and for policy efforts to strengthen civil society in the face of contemporary anti-democratic pressures.

Keywords

Democratic trust; populism; post-truth politics; social capital; civil society; Indonesia; Putnam; disinformation; democratic backsliding; political polarization



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1. Introduction

"When political leaders learn they can say anything true or false, consistent or inconsistent without electoral penalty, the informational infrastructure that sustains democratic accountability collapses. This is the moment when democracy becomes post-truth: not merely when lies are told, but when truth-telling ceases to function as a social norm with political consequences."

Pippa Norris & Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (2019)

The liberal democratic order that expanded across the globe in the late twentieth century is confronting a legitimacy crisis of historic proportions. From the United States to Brazil, Hungary to the Philippines, and now increasingly in Indonesia, established patterns of democratic governance are being destabilized by a convergence of forces: the rise of populist political movements that mobilize against democratic institutions rather than through them; the proliferation of disinformation ecosystems that undermine the epistemic foundations of public deliberation; and the erosion of the social capital—the networks of trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement that enables democratic civil society to function as a check on state and market power (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Putnam, 2020).

Indonesia presents a particularly significant and instructive case for the study of these dynamics. As the world's third-largest democracy, the fourth most populous nation, and the largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia occupies a central position in debates about the global future of democratic governance. Having undergone a remarkable transition from Suharto-era authoritarianism to competitive electoral democracy in the post-1998 Reformasi period, Indonesia has been widely celebrated as a democratic success story in Southeast Asia—a reputation that now faces serious challenge (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019; Mietzner, 2021). Institutional trust surveys consistently show declining public confidence in democratic institutions: trust in the national parliament (DPR) declined from 41.2 percent in 2018 to 33.4 percent in 2024; trust in political parties fell from 28.6 percent to 19.7 percent over the same period; and trust in the electoral commission (KPU) declined from 66.4

percent to 51.3 percent following the contested 2024 presidential election (Lembaga Survei Indonesia, 2024).

These declines in institutional trust have been accompanied by the rise of populist political discourse, the proliferation of disinformation on social media platforms, and increasing polarization along religious and identity lines. The 2016–2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election in which incumbent Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) was defeated and subsequently imprisoned following mass Islamist mobilization organized partly through WhatsApp networks represented a watershed moment in Indonesian post-truth politics, demonstrating the capacity of digitally mediated disinformation to translate into electoral outcomes and judicial processes (Lim, 2021; Mietzner, 2021). The subsequent crystallization of a '1212 movement' and the growing interpenetration of Islamist populism and electoral politics has further complicated Indonesia's democratic trajectory.

Against this backdrop, this article advances three core arguments. First, the crisis of institutional trust in Indonesia and comparable contexts is not primarily a product of rational updating based on actual institutional failure though such failure is real but is rather driven by the structural dynamics of populist narrative production and post-truth information ecosystems that systematically amplify distrust beyond what institutional performance would justify. Second, the erosion of institutional trust has disproportionate consequences for what Putnam (2020) terms 'bridging social capital': the cross-cutting ties between socially heterogeneous groups that enable democratic pluralism and constructive conflict resolution. Third, the platformization of political communication has created a structural environment in which the conditions for trust erosion and populist mobilization are continuously reproduced, independent of any specific political actor or episode.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical literature on trust, social capital, populism, and post-truth politics; Section 3 outlines the methodology; Section 4 presents the conceptual framework and empirical findings; Section 5 develops the critical discussion; and Section 6 concludes with theoretical and policy reflections.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Social Capital and Democratic Governance

Robert Putnam's social capital theory provides the foundational analytical framework for understanding the relationship between civil society and democratic governance. In his seminal comparative studies of Italian regional governance and American civic life, Putnam (2020; originally 1993, 2000) demonstrates that the density and character of civic associations, networks of reciprocity, and norms of generalized trust constitute the social infrastructure of effective democratic governance. Societies with high stocks of 'bridging social capital' horizontal networks connecting socially heterogeneous groups consistently outperform those with predominantly 'bonding social capital' tight networks within homogeneous communities in terms of democratic quality, institutional effectiveness, and collective problem-solving capacity.

Putnam's framework has been extensively applied and critically extended in the context of contemporary democratic challenges. Scholars including Hooghe & Dassonneville (2018) and Inglehart & Norris (2019) have documented a secular decline in social capital across Western democracies, associated with the decline of traditional associational life, growing economic inequality, and cultural-generational value change. In the Global South context, Sidel (2021) and Tomsa (2019) have applied Putnam's framework to Southeast Asian democracies, identifying distinctive configurations of social capital that combine strong bonding capital within religious and ethnic communities with weak bridging capital across communal boundaries a configuration that, they argue, renders these democracies particularly vulnerable to populist communal mobilization.

2.2 Populism as Anti-Pluralist Political Logic

The theoretical literature on populism has undergone substantial development over the past decade, with the ideational approach pioneered by Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017) emerging as the dominant framework. On this account, populism is best understood not as a policy position or leadership style but as a 'thin ideology' that divides society into two antagonistic and homogeneous groups the 'pure people' and the 'corrupt elite' and holds that politics should be an expression of the 'general will' of the people as interpreted by the populist leader. Crucially, populism is inherently anti-pluralist: it denies the legitimacy of intra-popular diversity, treats political opposition as a form of

treason against the people, and positions democratic institutions courts, independent media, constitutional constraints as instruments of elite domination rather than popular protection (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Weyland, 2020).

In the Indonesian context, populism has taken distinctive forms shaped by the country's religious demography, ethnic diversity, and post-authoritarian political culture. Aspinall & Mietzner (2019) identify the rise of 'electoral populism' in which populist appeals are deployed within formal electoral frameworks as a characteristic feature of Indonesian democratic politics since 2014. The Islamist populism mobilized around the 212 movement and the candidacy of Prabowo Subianto draws upon a distinctive articulation of Islamic identity, anti-Chinese sentiment, and anti-establishment resentment that is simultaneously local in its cultural reference and global in its structural logic (Mietzner, 2021; Tomsa, 2019).

2.3 Post-Truth Politics and the Epistemic Crisis of Democracy

The concept of 'post-truth politics' captures a qualitatively novel feature of contemporary political communication: the systematic deployment of factually false or misleading information by political actors, and the structural conditions particularly social media platforms' algorithmic amplification of emotionally engaging content that enable such information to achieve significant political effects irrespective of its factual accuracy (McIntyre, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). Hannah Arendt's (1951, 1972) political philosophy of truth, lying, and totalitarianism, while developed in a different historical context, retains significant analytical utility for understanding post-truth dynamics: her observation that the consistent falsification of political reality undermines not merely the credibility of particular claims but the very capacity for the distinction between fact and fabrication upon which political judgment depends anticipates many features of contemporary post-truth political environments.

In the digital media ecosystem, post-truth dynamics are structurally amplified by platform algorithms designed to maximize engagement rather than epistemic quality. As Waisbord (2018) documents, social media platforms' business models create powerful incentives for the production and dissemination of emotionally activating misinformation, generating what he terms 'post-truth publics':

communities of political identity whose shared beliefs are maintained more by affective solidarity than by shared factual reality. In Indonesia, this dynamic has been extensively documented in the context of the 2014, 2019, and 2024 election cycles, in which political hoaxes (hoaks), hate speech, and identity-based disinformation circulated at scale through WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels (Lim, 2021; Perdana & Toumbourou, 2020).

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic qualitative review methodology integrating theoretical analysis with secondary empirical data. The literature review encompassed peer-reviewed scholarship published between 2018 and 2025, accessed through Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using search terms including 'democratic trust,' 'institutional trust Indonesia,' 'populism Southeast Asia,' 'post-truth politics,' 'social capital democracy,' and 'disinformation Indonesia.' Secondary data analysis drew upon the Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI) institutional trust surveys (2018–2024), the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute State of Southeast Asia Survey (2020–2024), Edelman Trust Barometer Indonesia Reports (2020–2024), and Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project indicators for Indonesia. Analytical approach integrates Putnam's social capital framework, Mudde & Kaltwasser's populism studies, and critical political theory in a cross-cutting conceptual framework, as detailed in Section 4.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 presents the study's analytical framework, mapping the key mechanisms through which populism and post-truth politics erode social capital and threaten civil society cohesion.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Trust Erosion–Populism–Social Capital Nexus and Its Effects on Democratic Civil Society			
Driver of Trust Erosion	Mechanism of Populist Amplification	Social Capital Dimension Affected	Consequence for Civil Society Cohesion
Political corruption & elite impunity	Anti-establishment narratives; 'drain the	Institutional trust (Putnam's trust bridging	Legitimacy crisis; delegitimation of

	swamp' rhetoric	capital)	democratic procedures
Post-truth information ecosystem	Disinformation diffusion; algorithmic echo chambers	Epistemic commons; shared factual reality	Fragmentation of public discourse; political tribalization
Economic inequality & exclusion	Scapegoating of minorities; resentment politics	Bonding capital within homogeneous groups	In-group solidarity intensification; out-group hostility
Identity politics & polarization	Moral Manichaeism: 'pure people' vs. 'corrupt elite'	Bridging capital across social cleavages	Civil society fragmentation along religious/ethnic lines
Weak institutional accountability	Strongman appeal; 'decisive leadership' narrative	Civic participation & democratic efficacy	Democratic backsliding; authoritarian norm acceptance
Platform-mediated political communication	Viral emotional content displaces deliberative discourse	Public sphere quality (Habermas)	Erosion of deliberative democracy; post-rational politics
Overarching Outcome → Declining democratic resilience: civil society loses its capacity to function as a buffer against authoritarian regression and as a site of constructive political deliberation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Putnam, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).			

Source: Authors' theoretical synthesis, adapted from Putnam (2020), Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017), Norris & Inglehart (2019), and Arendt (1972). Framework applied to Indonesian democratic context.

4.2 Patterns of Institutional Trust Decline in Indonesia

Table 1 presents longitudinal institutional trust data for Indonesia, revealing a consistent pattern of declining public confidence across all democratic institutions over the 2018–2024 period.

Institution	Indonesia 2018	Indonesia 2021	Indonesia 2024	SEA Regional Average 2024
National Parliament (DPR)	41.2%	36.8%	33.4%	39.7%
Political Parties	28.6%	22.4%	19.7%	26.3%
Judiciary/Courts (MA & MK)	52.3%	44.1%	42.6%	47.2%
Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU)	66.4%	57.9%	51.3%	54.8%

Executive Government (President)	74.1%	63.8%	58.2%	61.4%
Mainstream News Media	48.7%	38.3%	34.9%	42.1%
Civil Society Organizations	57.2%	52.6%	49.8%	51.3%
Military (TNI)	78.4%	74.2%	71.6%	68.9%
Source: Adapted from Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI, 2024), ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute State of Southeast Asia Survey (2024), and Norris & Inglehart (2019) comparative democracy dataset. Values represent percentage of respondents expressing 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of trust.				

The data reveals several analytically significant patterns. First, trust in electoral institutions—particularly the KPU—has declined most sharply (from 66.4% to 51.3%), reflecting the contested character of recent electoral processes and the widespread circulation of election fraud allegations on social media. Second, political parties exhibit the lowest trust levels of all measured institutions (19.7% in 2024), consistent with cross-national findings on the 'party decline' thesis and the structural disarticulation of mass-membership party organizations in the digital age (Dalton, 2018). Third, the military (TNI) retains by far the highest institutional trust (71.6%), a finding that carries significant implications for democratic resilience—high military trust relative to civilian institutions creates structural conditions favorable to authoritarian regress.

Comparison with the Southeast Asian regional average reveals that Indonesian institutional trust levels are in several cases below regional means, suggesting that Indonesia's democratic trust crisis is not merely a regional convergence but reflects specific domestic dynamics including corruption, identity polarization, and post-truth information flows.

4.3 The Delegitimation of Epistemic Authority

The most structurally consequential mechanism of trust erosion identified in this study is the systematic delegitimation of epistemic authority: the discrediting of expert knowledge, institutional fact-finding, and mainstream media reporting as instruments of elite manipulation. This delegitimation operates through two reinforcing channels. The first is populist narrative construction: by positioning the 'corrupt elite' as including not only political and economic actors but also academic experts, mainstream journalists, and technocratic institutions, populist politicians preemptively

discredit sources of information that might contradict their claims, creating what McIntyre (2018) describes as an 'epistemically closed' political community.

The second channel is algorithmic amplification: social media platforms' recommendation systems consistently favor content that generates high emotional engagement—outrage, fear, moral indignation—over content that is factually accurate but emotionally neutral. In the Indonesian context, Perdana & Toumbourou (2020) document how WhatsApp-mediated disinformation networks have developed distinctive organizational structures—coordinated networks of group administrators who selectively amplify politically convenient misinformation—that enable the systematic delegitimation of institutional authority in ways that are difficult to counter through conventional fact-checking mechanisms.

4.4 The Tribalization of Political Identity

Populist politics in Indonesia, as elsewhere, produces a characteristic restructuring of social capital: while eroding bridging capital across social cleavages, it intensifies bonding capital within partisan and identity communities. The 212 movement's capacity to mobilize millions of Indonesian Muslims in defense of Islamist political claims rested precisely upon the intensification of Islamic identity-based bonding social capital—the strengthening of intra-group solidarity through shared participation in rituals of communal mobilization, including mass prayers, consumer boycotts, and digital solidarity networks (Mietzner, 2021; Tomsa, 2019).

This tribalization of political identity has direct consequences for civil society cohesion. As Putnam (2020) demonstrates, functioning democratic civil society requires significant stocks of bridging capital: the capacity of organizations and citizens to form productive relationships across lines of religious, ethnic, class, and partisan difference. The progressive erosion of such bridging capital as citizens retreat into politically homogeneous information environments and socially homogeneous community networks threatens the pluralist foundations of democratic civil society and creates conditions in which political conflict increasingly takes the form of zero-sum identity competition rather than interest-based negotiation.

4.5 The Platformization of Political Affect

The structural transformation of political communication through digital platforms represents perhaps the most novel and difficult-to-address mechanism of civil society erosion identified in this study. Social media platforms—particularly WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, each of which commands massive Indonesian user bases—have become the primary channels through which political information, opinion, and emotion circulate among the Indonesian public. The architecture of these platforms, shaped by engagement-maximizing algorithms, structurally privileges content that activates strong emotional responses over content that is factually complex, ethically nuanced, or deliberatively oriented (Lim, 2021; Waisbord, 2018).

The consequences for democratic civil society are profound. When the primary channels of political communication are designed to maximize emotional activation rather than epistemic quality, the informational infrastructure of deliberative democracy—shared facts, reasoned argument, mutual recognition—is systematically degraded. Citizens are increasingly sorted into affectively coherent communities of political identity whose shared beliefs are maintained by emotional solidarity rather than evidential scrutiny, and whose political engagement takes the form of identity performance rather than deliberative participation. This platformization of political affect does not merely accompany the crisis of democratic trust; it actively produces and reproduces it, creating self-reinforcing cycles of distrust, outrage, and disengagement.

5. Conclusion

This article has examined the multidimensional crisis of institutional trust in contemporary political systems, with particular attention to the Indonesian case, through an integrative theoretical framework synthesizing Putnam's social capital theory, Mudde & Kaltwasser's populism studies, and Arendt's political theory of truth and the public sphere. The analysis has identified three central mechanisms of civil society erosion: epistemic delegitimation, identity tribalization, and affective platformization—that together constitute a distinctive syndrome of democratic fragility in the age of populism and post-truth.

The Indonesian case illustrates with particular clarity both the global character of these dynamics and their distinctive local articulations. Indonesia's democratic crisis is not simply a reflection of global trends but is shaped by specific configurations of Islamic political mobilization, oligarchic power dynamics, digital media penetration, and institutional weakness that produce a particularly volatile combination of trust erosion and populist opportunity. The institutional trust data presented in this study reveal a consistent pattern of declining confidence across democratic institutions that cannot be attributed to any single cause but reflects the cumulative effects of the three mechanisms analyzed above.

The theoretical implications of these findings are significant. They suggest that the conventional social capital framework, while analytically indispensable, requires supplementation with attention to the structural role of digital platforms in producing and reproducing social capital deficits—a dimension that was absent from Putnam's original framework and that represents a qualitatively novel mechanism of civil society erosion. They also suggest that the analysis of populism must attend not only to supply-side factors—the strategic choices of populist politicians—but to demand-side structural conditions: the social capital deficits, epistemic insecurities, and affective economies that make populist appeals resonant.

Policy implications include the need for comprehensive digital media literacy programs capable of developing citizens' critical evaluation of political information; for regulatory frameworks that impose epistemic quality standards on social media platforms' political content recommendation systems; for investment in civil society organizations that build bridging social capital across political, religious, and ethnic cleavages; and for institutional reform efforts that address the actual performance deficits—particularly corruption—that provide rational foundations for institutional distrust. These interventions will not resolve the crisis of democratic trust overnight; they represent long-term investments in the social and informational infrastructure upon which democratic governance ultimately depends.

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