

# From Populist to Meritocracy: The Urgency of Meritocracy as The First Step Towards A Quality Parliament in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** Populism in Indonesian electoral politics has led to concerns about the decline in the quality of parliament, where candidates are often selected based on popularity, media presence, or populist appeal rather than competence or integrity. This trend weakens the effectiveness and accountability of legislative bodies.

**Purpose.** The study aims to emphasize the urgency of implementing meritocracy in the legislative candidate selection process. It advocates for a more qualified, responsive, and integrity-based parliament that prioritizes long-term public interest over short-term populist appeal.

**Method.** This paper employs a qualitative literature review and comparative analysis. It examines legislative recruitment practices in Indonesia and contrasts them with Singapore's merit-based system, drawing conclusions about the benefits of a meritocratic approach for democratic governance.

**Results.** The findings show that merit-based recruitment leads to more professional, accountable, and effective legislators. It enhances parliamentary performance, legislative oversight, and strengthens substantive democracy. The article concludes that reforms in political parties, public political education, and a transparent, capability-based selection mechanism are essential to shift Indonesian electoral politics from populism to meritocracy.

**Conclusion.** Populist politics fails to produce competent representatives. To ensure effective, accountable governance, meritocracy must guide legislative candidate selection, emphasizing expertise and public service. This shift is essential not just for better policy, but for building a substantive and sustainable democracy that truly serves the public.

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## KEYWORDS

populism, meritocracy, parliament, political recruitment, substantive democracy

## INTRODUCTION

Post-Reformation democracy in Indonesia has experienced a paradox between open electoral procedures and the stagnant quality of political representation. Ideally, parliament, as a legislative institution, should be staffed with individuals of competence, integrity, and strong legislative capacity.

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However, the reality on the ground shows that the political recruitment process is still dominated by populism, money politics, and patronage, which hinders the creation of meritocracy within parliamentary institutions.

The phenomenon of populism in Indonesia is growing due to socio-economic inequality maintained by the system, corrupt practices, and an unresponsive political system. Mudde and Kaltwasser explain that populism grows due to demand from marginalized communities and supply from political actors who exploit this situation (Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, CR, 2017). In Indonesia, populism is often exploited by political elites to maintain power through identity rhetoric and populist promises without clear policy direction.

In this context, meritocracy as a system that emphasizes individual abilities and achievements becomes very important to improve the quality of parliament. However, the implementation of meritocracy in Indonesia still faces various challenges, such as the dominance of patronage politics, political intervention in the recruitment process, and a lack of transparency in the selection of legislative candidates. Furthermore, political parties, as the primary institutions in the political recruitment process, have not fully adopted the principles of meritocracy (Haris, S., 2020). Political parties in Indonesia lack meritocratic recruitment mechanisms and tend to be influenced by political interests and money.



Source: Kompas Research and Development, 2024



Source: Kompas Research and Development, 2024

This situation is exacerbated by dynastic political practices that hinder regeneration and the entry of qualified individuals into parliament. Approximately 285 (38.9%) members of the MPR RI for the 2024-2029 period are related to public officials or political figures. Priambada, YB, 2024). Of these, 53% had vertical relationships (e.g., child-parent), and 47% had horizontal relationships (e.g.,

husband-wife) (Priambada, YB, 2024). Furthermore, of the 137 young parliamentarians elected, approximately 62% came from political dynasty backgrounds (Priambada, YB, 2024). Therefore, the urgency of implementing meritocracy in the political recruitment process is becoming increasingly urgent. This step is also crucial to strengthen substantive democracy and reduce the dominance of populist politics, which tends to be detrimental to the democratization process in Indonesia.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research method through a literature review and comparative analysis. It examines existing academic works, reports, and policy papers on legislative recruitment in Indonesia, focusing on the influence of populism. The study also compares Indonesia's recruitment practices with Singapore's meritocratic model, identifying key differences and best practices. By analyzing both systems, the research highlights how merit-based recruitment can enhance the competence, accountability, and democratic quality of legislative institutions.

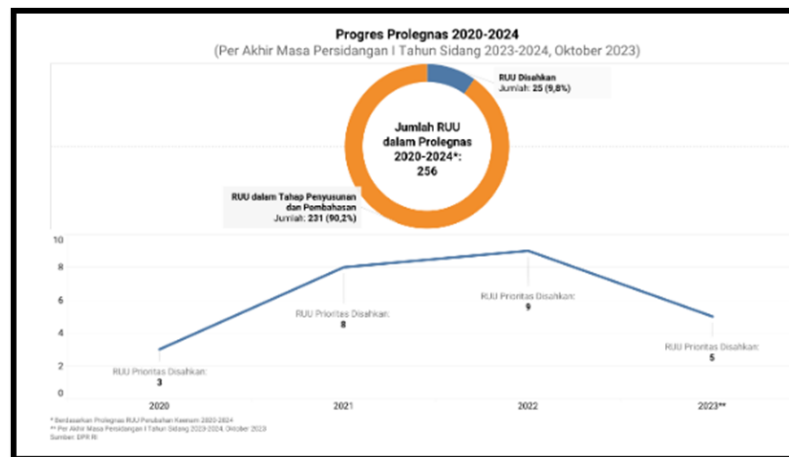
## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Parliamentary Problems When Populism Defeats Meritocracy

Parliament should ideally be an institution that reflects the people's representation and provides a platform for competent, visionary individuals capable of producing quality public policies. However, in Indonesian political practice, parliament often reflects the dominance of populism, which disregards the principle of meritocracy. This creates serious problems for the quality of legislation and the accountability of representatives. Populism, which relies on emotional appeals, identity symbols, and anti-elite rhetoric, has proven to be more electorally marketable than academic credentials or a policy track record. Furthermore, low meritocracy results in policies that are not based on data and evidence. Legislators with minimal competence tend to get caught up in symbolic politics and lack the capacity to formulate policies based on real problems. This worsens the performance of parliament as a lawmaking institution. Furthermore, in a democratic system, parliament plays a central role in carrying out legislative, oversight, and budgetary functions. Ideally, these functions should be carried out by individuals selected based on competence and integrity through a meritocratic system. However, the reality of Indonesian politics shows the dominance of populism and patronage in the political recruitment process, resulting in low-quality parliamentary performance.

In the legislative function, the non-application of meritocracy has an impact on the low quality and quantity of legislative products. For example, of the 225 laws, only 48 originated from the priority National Legislation Program (Prolegnas). The majority, 177 laws, were open cumulative bills that did not go through a systematic legislative planning process. This situation

reflects the low achievement of the 2020-2024 Prolegnas target, which included 256 bills. By the end of the term, only around 9.8% of the priority bills had been successfully passed (Lubis, RB, 2023).



**Source: Good Stats, 2023**

This indicates that many important bills concerning the public interest, such as the Domestic Workers Protection Bill and the Indigenous Peoples Bill, have not received priority in deliberation. Conversely, the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) this term tends to be quicker in discussing and passing bills related to the interests of political elites and those in power. For example, revisions to the State Ministries Law, the Presidential Advisory Council Law, and the Immigration Law were passed swiftly near the end of his term, despite drawing criticism for the lack of public participation in their deliberations. One clear example of the negative impact of the lack of meritocracy in legislation is the enactment of the Job Creation Law. This law was passed swiftly and then declared conditionally unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court due to procedural flaws in its drafting process (Fadillah, N., 2022).

The inability to implement the meritocracy system in parliament also has a significant impact on the weak oversight function of the executive. Many members of parliament lack the background or expertise to effectively carry out their oversight function. This is reflected in the minimal use of oversight rights, such as the right of inquiry and interpellation, in responding to various crucial issues. During this period, the DPR only formed one Special Committee (Pansus) with the right of inquiry, namely regarding the organization of the Hajj pilgrimage. Other important issues, such as the Kanjuruhan tragedy, cooking oil shortages, allegations of election fraud, and online gambling, were not followed up with the formation of special committees or the use of the right of interpellation (Putra, N., 2024). This demonstrates the DPR's lack of response to issues that directly impact the wider community.

In the budgeting function, the non-application of meritocracy opens up opportunities for budget irregularities. One concrete example is the controversial policy of providing housing allowances to members of the House of Representatives (DPR). ICW noted that the total budget

wastage for housing allowances ranged from IDR 1.36 trillion to IDR 2.06 trillion during this period (Indonesia Corruption Watch, 2024). These allowances were transferred directly to the personal accounts of council members without adequate oversight mechanisms, thus potentially being misused and lacking accountability. ICW considered this policy a waste of state funds and not in the public interest (Indonesia Corruption Watch, 2024). The lack of competence and integrity of DPR members in their budgeting function is also reflected in the minimal follow-up to oversight recommendations.

Research by the Indonesian Parliamentary Center (IPC) noted that the government only followed up on 37 percent of DPR recommendations, while the remaining 63 percent were ignored (Putra, N., 2024). This indicates that the DPR has failed to carry out its oversight function effectively, resulting in weak control over the use of the state budget. Furthermore, the dominance of populism and patronage in the political system not only weakens the primary functions of parliament, such as legislation, oversight, and budgeting, but also paves the way for systemic corruption, from the nomination stage to the moment an elected individual assumes his or her duties as a member of parliament. The legislative nomination process in Indonesia relies heavily on financial capital. Legislative candidates often face high campaign costs, including the installation of campaign materials, the distribution of social assistance, and the practice of money politics. In many cases, they rely on sponsorship from businesspeople or political patrons who then demand a "return" upon their successful seat in parliament.

### **Singapore as an Example in Implementing a Meritocracy System in Parliament**

Singapore has long been known as a country that consistently applies the principle of meritocracy in its government and parliamentary systems. This approach emphasizes the selection and promotion of individuals based on ability and achievement, rather than political connections or social background. The implementation of meritocracy in Singapore has contributed significantly to government efficiency, bureaucratic integrity, and rapid economic growth. In the parliamentary context, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) implements a rigorous, merit-based recruitment process for legislative candidates. Candidates for parliament are selected through a "talent spotting" mechanism by senior figures in government and industry, with a focus on individuals with outstanding track records in the public service, military, academia, or other professional sectors. This approach aims to ensure that the legislature is staffed with individuals of high competence and integrity. One indicator of the success of Singapore's meritocratic system is bureaucratic efficiency and integrity. According to Transparency International, Singapore scored 84 on its Corruption Perceptions Index in 2024, making it the third cleanest country in the world and the most

transparent in Asia (Chua, N., 2025). This reflects the effectiveness of the meritocratic system in preventing corrupt practices and ensuring accountability in government.

### **Meritocracy Becomes the Foundation of Designing Solutions to Parliamentary Problems in Indonesia**

The application of the principle of meritocracy in the recruitment of parliament members is a strategic step to improve the quality of legislation, the effectiveness of oversight, and the integrity of budget management. This system emphasizes selection based on competence, integrity, and professional track record, thereby reducing the dominance of patronage and populism that often undermine parliamentary function. In Indonesia, efforts toward meritocracy have begun through an open selection system. However, its implementation still faces challenges, such as political interference and nepotism, which obscure the principles of true meritocracy. To strengthen this system, comprehensive reform of the legislative recruitment process is needed.

First, the legislative candidate selection process must be based on objective criteria that assess competence, integrity, and professional track record. In the context of electoral democracy, the legislative candidate selection process plays a crucial role in ensuring the quality of political representation. Political recruitment that is not based on meritocracy often opens up space for politicization, nepotism, and corruption (Norris, P., & Lovenduski, J., 1995). Therefore, it is crucial to have objective criteria that assess competence, integrity, and professional track record in the legislative candidate selection process. This can be achieved through an open, transparent and accountable selection mechanism, involving an independent institution to oversee the process. Furthermore, research by Scarrow, Webb, and Poguntke shows that parties that open their selection process to the public or independent third parties tend to have higher levels of public trust (Scarrow, S.E., Webb, P.D., & Poguntke, T., 2017). Such a mechanism also increases the party's chances of recruiting cadres who are truly competent and possess high integrity. Objective criteria enable political parties to select candidates who are not only popular but also capable of carrying out legislative, oversight, and representational duties effectively. Research by Rahat and Hazan emphasizes that a transparent and accountable internal selection system tends to produce legislators who are more substantively responsible to their constituents and the party (Rahat, G., & Hazan, RY, 2001). Experiences such as those carried out by Singapore can be a reference, where the People's Action Party (PAP) applies a "talent spotting" approach to recruit high-achieving individuals from various sectors, such as public service, military, academics, and professionals (Mutalib, H., 2002).

Second, Providing positions for individuals with proven expertise, track records, and capabilities in specific fields. Meritocracy should be a key principle in placing legislators in commissions appropriate to their expertise, so that parliament becomes not merely an arena for pragmatic political compromise, but rather an institution capable of delivering knowledge- and



expertise-based solutions. In complex situations such as the era of digital disruption and the climate crisis, for example, legislators with strong backgrounds in law, economics, the environment, or technology are needed to ensure the lawmaking process is truly responsive to the needs of the times. Applying the principle of meritocracy does not mean ignoring socio-political representation, such as gender, ethnicity, or marginalized groups. Rather, meritocracy needs to be understood as an effort to ensure that anyone entering parliament, regardless of their social background, has the adequate capacity to carry out legislative functions effectively. Reforming political party institutions is key to encouraging capability-based legislative recruitment. Without reforming the internal party recruitment system, the nomination process will continue to be dominated by short-term electoral considerations, rather than the long-term public interest.

Finally, political education for the public needs to be improved to build awareness of the importance of choosing legislative candidates based on competence and integrity, not solely on popularity or populist promises, which are often unrealistic. Without adequate political education, voters are easily trapped by the false images and political rhetoric deliberately created by candidates through the media or instant campaigns, rather than by their actual track records and capabilities. The low level of political literacy among Indonesians means that political preferences are determined more by emotional factors and primordial ties such as ethnicity, religion, or figurativeness, rather than by rational analysis of a candidate's programs and legislative capabilities. In such situations, candidates with substantial resources to generate instant popularity have an advantage over those with greater capacity and integrity.

Therefore, political education must be directed at developing the public's critical thinking, enabling them to objectively assess legislative candidates based on their track records, performance, and policy vision. Furthermore, the implementation of political education campaigns must also involve various stakeholders. Relying solely on formal institutions such as the General Elections Commission (KPU) is not sufficient. Civil society organizations, mass media, educational institutions, and even religious communities need to actively participate in disseminating accurate information and building political awareness oriented toward substantial democratic values. By improving political education, it is hoped that a shift in political culture will occur from a transactional one to a deliberative one based on rational considerations. Politically literate voters are less easily swayed by populist promises or dawn raids, as they understand that the quality of elected legislators will influence the direction of development, social policies, and the fulfillment of citizens' rights. Therefore, improving political education is not only crucial in the lead-up to elections but must be a long-term agenda for democratic development.

## CONCLUSION

Populist politics, which has historically prioritized empty promises, personal image, and emotional approaches, has proven incapable of producing competent and virtuous representatives. To address this, meritocracy needs to be a fundamental principle in the legislative candidate recruitment process, prioritizing selection based on expertise, track record, and commitment to public service. Implementing meritocratic principles not only improves the quality of policies produced but also strengthens accountability and public trust in legislative institutions. Therefore, prioritizing meritocracy is not merely a technical reform, but a prerequisite for substantive democracy that can address the people's needs in a real and sustainable manner.

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