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Article

Mengolah as Grassroots Political Methodology: Decolonizing Lobbying Practices among Indonesian Youth

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Abstract

This paper proposes *mengolah*, a culturally embedded Indonesian term describing informal grassroots lobbying and political brokerage, as a decolonial methodology and **medium of political communication** for understanding youth political participation in Indonesia. Grounded in the everyday practices of Indonesian political culture, *mengolah* represents a distinct form of political engagement that operates through personal networks, informal negotiation, and relational trust rather than formal institutional channels. This study explicitly positions *mengolah* **not as an inherently corrupt practice** but as a **legitimate cultural medium** through which citizens engage with democratic processes, functioning analogously to constituent services and political networking in Western democracies while reflecting Indonesian values of *kebersamaan* (togetherness) and *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation). Drawing on data from the 2024 Indonesian general elections, where youth voters comprised 56% of the electorate, this study examines how *mengolah* functions as both a grassroots political methodology and a **structured pathway for political mobility**. Skilled practitioners of *mengolah* (*pengolah*) typically progress from grassroots volunteers to organizational leaders in *organisasi masyarakat* (mass organizations) and eventually to formal party cadres or elected officials. This trajectory demonstrates that *mengolah* serves as political apprenticeship, a medium for cultivating democratic capacities and connecting informal community leadership with institutional politics. Through analysis of social media data, electoral brokerage patterns, and youth political behavior, this study contributes to the project of decolonizing political science by centering indigenous Indonesian political practices as legitimate, functional, and epistemologically significant objects of scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: grassroots lobbying; political brokerage; decolonial methodology; Indonesian youth politics; informal politics; political medium; organisasi masyarakat

JEL Classification: D72; D73; Z13

1. Introduction

The study of political participation in postcolonial societies has long been dominated by Western theoretical frameworks that privilege formal institutional processes (voting, party membership, and structured advocacy), while marginalizing informal, culturally embedded modes of political engagement [9]. In Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy and Southeast Asia's most populous nation, the practice of *mengolah* represents a distinctive form of grassroots political activity that has received limited scholarly attention within the global political science literature. *Mengolah*, derived from the Indonesian root word *olah* (to process, manage, or work with), refers to the informal processes of negotiation, lobbying, and influence-building that occur through personal networks, social gatherings, and reciprocal relationships rather than through formal political channels.

The significance of understanding *mengolah* has become particularly acute following the 2024 Indonesian general elections, which marked a watershed moment in youth political participation. For

the first time in Indonesian electoral history, young voters, comprising Millennials (born 1981–1996) and Generation Z (born 1997–2012), constituted approximately 56% of the total electorate, numbering over 114 million voters [17]. This demographic shift has transformed the landscape of Indonesian politics, with political parties and candidates increasingly recognizing the necessity of engaging young voters through channels and methods that resonate with their communicative practices and cultural dispositions.

Unlike the formal lobbying practices documented in Western democracies, which typically involve registered lobbyists, structured advocacy campaigns, and institutionalized access points [7], *mengolah* operates through what Indonesian political actors call “*jalur belakang*” (back channels) or “*jalan tikus*” (rat paths), informal pathways to influence that prioritize personal relationships over procedural formalities. This methodology reflects what Aspinall [1] has identified as the personalistic nature of Indonesian electoral politics, where party structures are often weak and candidates rely heavily on personal networks and brokerage relationships to mobilize voters.

Critical Clarification: It is essential to establish from the outset that *mengolah* is **not inherently synonymous with corruption, vote buying, or illegal political manipulation**. Western frameworks often conflate informal political practices with corruption [9], yet such conflation imposes ethnocentric standards that fail to appreciate the cultural legitimacy and functional necessity of *mengolah* in Indonesian society. Rather, *mengolah* is best understood as **a medium of political communication**, a culturally embedded mechanism through which citizens engage with power structures, articulate collective interests, and navigate democratic politics. In this sense, *mengolah* serves functions analogous to constituent services, political networking, and grassroots lobbying in Western democracies, albeit through modalities shaped by Indonesian cultural values of *kebersamaan* (togetherness), *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), and *musyawarah* (consensus-building). The skilled practitioner of *mengolah*, known as a *pengolah*, represents not a corrupt operator but rather a politically adept mediator who bridges the gap between formal institutions and grassroots communities.

The 2024 elections, dubbed the “TikTok Election” (*Pemilu TikTok*) by Indonesian media [15], witnessed an unprecedented fusion of traditional *mengolah* practices with digital political engagement. Social media platforms, particularly TikTok with over 99 million Indonesian users aged 18 and above, became crucial spaces where informal political brokerage migrated from physical *warung kopi* (coffee stalls) to virtual spaces of interaction [32]. Young political activists adapted the logic of *mengolah*, namely personal persuasion, relational trust-building, and reciprocal exchange, to digital environments, creating hybrid forms of grassroots political engagement that challenge conventional distinctions between online and offline political participation.

This article contributes to the project of decolonizing political science by proposing *mengolah* as both an object of study and a methodological framework for understanding Indonesian politics. Drawing on Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) seminal work on decolonizing methodologies and recent scholarship on indigenous political practices [22,27], this study argues that *mengolah* represents a culturally grounded epistemology of political engagement that cannot be adequately captured through imported Western frameworks of lobbying, advocacy, or political participation. By centering *mengolah* as a legitimate political methodology, this article seeks to expand the conceptual vocabulary available for understanding how politics operates in postcolonial democracies like Indonesia.

The following sections first situate *mengolah* within theoretical discussions of decolonial political methodology, then examine its etymology and conceptual dimensions, analyze its ecology in contemporary Indonesian politics, explore its digital transformation in the 2024 elections, and conclude with reflections on the implications for political science research in postcolonial contexts.

2. Decolonizing Political Methodology: Toward an Epistemology of the Grassroots

The decolonization of political science has emerged as a critical project in response to the discipline’s historical complicity with colonial power structures and its systematic marginalization of non-Western ways of knowing and practicing politics [11,23]. As Moyo [20] argues, the “methodicide”

of indigenous epistemologies, the systematic erasure of non-Western research methodologies, has produced a truncated understanding of politics that universalizes Western experiences while rendering other forms of political engagement invisible or pathologized.

2.1. The Problem of Conceptual Imperialism

Political science, as a discipline forged in the crucible of European and North American academic institutions, has historically operated through what Chakrabarty [10] terms “provincial universalism”, the tendency to present historically specific Western experiences as universal models of political development and practice. This epistemic violence is particularly evident in the study of political participation and lobbying, where concepts such as “civil society,” “interest group politics,” and “advocacy” carry implicit normative assumptions derived from Western liberal democratic contexts [13].

In the Indonesian context, the application of Western frameworks has often produced analytical distortions. Studies that measure political participation solely through formal indicators (voter turnout, party membership, union density) miss the vast terrain of informal politics through which most Indonesians actually engage with power and authority [26]. Similarly, analyses of lobbying that focus on formal advocacy organizations and institutional access points fail to capture the relational, network-based processes of influence that characterize Indonesian political culture.

2.2. Affirming Methodologies from the Global South

In response to these limitations, scholars have increasingly turned to “affirming methodologies” that center indigenous and locally grounded approaches to knowledge production [22]. These methodologies, which include *Liming* in Caribbean contexts [27], *Talanoa* in Pacific Islander communities [31], and *Charlas y Comidas* in Latin American settings [24], share a commitment to epistemic justice and the recognition of culturally embedded ways of knowing.

The development of affirming methodologies in Southeast Asia, however, remains underdeveloped compared to other regions. While African and Latin American scholarship has produced robust traditions of decolonial political theory, Southeast Asian political studies have been slower to systematically theorize indigenous political methodologies [6]. This gap reflects the region’s complex colonial history, involving multiple imperial powers (Dutch, British, French, Spanish, American, and Japanese) whose legacies have fragmented indigenous knowledge systems and created hybrid political cultures that resist easy categorization.

2.3. Toward a Methodology of Mengolah

Mengolah represents a contribution to this project of developing Southeast Asian affirming methodologies. As a political practice, it embodies principles that distinguish it from Western models of lobbying and advocacy:

First, *mengolah* is **relational** rather than transactional. While Western lobbying often operates through explicit exchange relationships (votes for policy concessions, campaign contributions for access), *mengolah* builds influence through the cultivation of long-term personal relationships (*hubungan*) that are not reducible to single transactions [8].

Second, *mengolah* is **processual** rather than instrumental. The term itself, derived from *olah* (to process or work with), emphasizes ongoing negotiation and adaptation rather than the achievement of predetermined outcomes. Political actors engaged in *mengolah* describe it as a continuous process of “*nyari jalur*” (finding pathways) rather than a discrete intervention.

Third, *mengolah* is **multiplex** rather than domain-specific. Unlike Western lobbying, which typically operates within clearly defined issue areas, *mengolah* traverses multiple social domains simultaneously (kinship networks, religious communities, business associations, and recreational groups), creating webs of obligation and influence that crosscut formal institutional boundaries.

3. Conceptualizing Mengolah: Etymology, Semantics, and Practice

3.1. Etymological Roots

The Indonesian term *mengolah* derives from the root *olah*, which carries connotations of processing, managing, working with, or handling something skillfully. In its most literal sense, *mengolah* means “to process” or “to treat”, as in *mengolah data* (processing data) or *mengolah limbah* (treating waste). However, in colloquial Indonesian political discourse, *mengolah* has acquired a more specific meaning: the skillful management of relationships and situations to achieve desired outcomes, particularly in contexts where formal procedures are insufficient or inappropriate.

The term carries semantic resonances with other Indonesian concepts that describe informal social processes. *Ngobrol* (chatting), *ngopi* (having coffee) [14], *arisan* (rotating savings gatherings), and *pengajian* (religious study groups) all describe social practices through which *mengolah* frequently occurs. These activities provide the social infrastructure (the spaces and occasions) through which informal political negotiation takes place.

3.2. Dimensions of Mengolah

Based on extensive field observation and analysis of Indonesian political discourse, *mengolah* can be understood as comprising four interconnected dimensions:

Network Cultivation (*Membangun Jaringan*): The foundation of *mengolah* lies in the deliberate cultivation of social networks that span multiple domains of social life. Political actors engaged in *mengolah* invest significant time and resources in maintaining relationships with individuals who might serve as nodes of influence, including community leaders, religious figures, business owners, educators, and local government officials. These networks are not merely instrumental connections but are characterized by what Indonesians call *keakraban* (familiarity/intimacy) and *kekeluargaan* (family-like relationships).

Reciprocal Exchange (*Timbal Balik*): *Mengolah* operates through cycles of reciprocal exchange that establish and maintain obligations between actors. These exchanges may involve material goods, services, information, or social recognition. The anthropological literature on Indonesian politics has documented how these exchange relationships underpin what Aspinall and Berenschot [4] term “patronage democracy”, a system in which political support is mediated through personal networks of obligation and favor.

Situational Navigation (*Mencari Celah*): A crucial skill in *mengolah* is the ability to read social situations and identify opportunities for intervention, what Indonesians call *mencari celah* (finding openings) or *nyari jalur* (seeking pathways). This requires intimate knowledge of local power structures, personal relationships, and the informal rules that govern social interaction.

Performative Competence (*Pandai Bersikap*): Finally, *mengolah* requires what Indonesians call “*pandai bersikap*”, or skillful self-presentation. This includes mastery of linguistic registers (shifting between formal Indonesian, regional languages, and youth slang), bodily comportment, and the ability to establish *nyaman* (comfortable) social atmospheres that facilitate open communication.

3.3. The Social Spaces of Mengolah

Mengolah occurs in specific social spaces that facilitate informal interaction. Table 1 identifies the primary venues where grassroots political lobbying takes place in Indonesia.

Table 1. Primary Social Spaces for Mengolah in Indonesian Politics

Space	Primary Function	Key Actors	Frequency
Warung Kopi (Coffee Stalls)	Informal discussion, rumor exchange	Local elites, youth activists	Daily
Musollah/Pengajian	Religious gatherings, moral legitimization	Religious leaders, community elders	Weekly
Karang Taruna (Youth Organizations)	Youth mobilization, campaign recruitment	Young political brokers	Monthly
Arisan (Savings Groups)	Women's political discussion, fund mobilization	Women community leaders	Bi-weekly
Social Media (TikTok, Instagram)	Viral content, opinion formation	Gen Z activists, influencers	Continuous
Kantor RT/RW (Neighborhood Offices)	Local dispute resolution, identity politics	Neighborhood heads, residents	As needed

These spaces serve as what Habermas [12] might recognize as alternative public spheres, sites where political discussion and opinion formation occur outside formal institutional channels. However, unlike the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas described, these Indonesian spaces are characterized by hierarchical relationships, personal obligations, and the interpenetration of public and private domains.

4. The Ecology of Mengolah in Indonesian Electoral Politics

4.1. Patronage, Brokerage, and Vote Mobilization

The 2024 Indonesian elections confirmed patterns of electoral politics that scholars have documented since the democratic transition: the dominance of personalistic campaigning, the weakness of party organizations at the grassroots level, and the centrality of vote brokers (*tim sukses*) in mobilizing electoral support [4,21]. Within this ecology, *mengolah* functions as the connective tissue that links political elites to grassroots communities through layers of intermediaries.

Aspinall et al. [5] estimate that successful legislative candidates in Indonesia typically employ between 50 and 150 vote brokers, creating a vast informal network of political operatives. These brokers, many of whom are young men in their twenties and thirties, engage in continuous *mengolah*, maintaining relationships with voters, identifying community needs, and delivering material and symbolic benefits on behalf of candidates.

Table 2 presents data on the scale of brokerage networks in Indonesian provincial and district elections.

Table 2. Estimated Brokerage Networks in Indonesian Legislative Elections (2014–2024)

Province	Avg. Brokers per Provincial Candidate	Avg. Brokers per District Candidate	Estimated Total Brokers
Central Java	85	62	~185,000
East Java	92	68	~210,000
West Sumatra	44	38	~28,800
North Sulawesi	67	51	~45,000
Jakarta	78	55	~125,000
National Estimate (2024)			~750,000

Source: Adapted from Aspinall et al. [5] and author’s calculations based on 2024 electoral data.

4.2. Youth Political Entrepreneurship

The 2024 elections witnessed the emergence of a new phenomenon: the professionalization of youth political entrepreneurship. Young Indonesians, particularly those in urban areas with social

media literacy, have increasingly positioned themselves as specialists in *mengolah*, offering their services to candidates as digital campaigners, community organizers, and grassroots brokers.

Survey data from the 2024 elections reveal several characteristics of these young political entrepreneurs (Table 3).

Table 3. Characteristics of Youth Political Brokers in the 2024 Indonesian Elections

Characteristic	Percentage
Age 17–25 (Gen Z)	38%
Age 26–35 (Millennial)	45%
Age 36+	17%
High school education	42%
University education	51%
Other	7%
Primary motivation: Material benefit	35%
Primary motivation: Political ideals	28%
Primary motivation: Social status/networking	22%
Primary motivation: Other	15%
Active on TikTok for campaigning	78%
Active on Instagram for campaigning	65%
Active on X (Twitter) for campaigning	34%

Source: Author’s survey of 450 youth political brokers conducted February–April 2024.

These young brokers represent a hybrid form of political engagement that combines traditional *mengolah* practices with new digital competencies. They are equally comfortable organizing offline gatherings at *warung kopi* and managing viral social media campaigns, sometimes simultaneously.

4.3. The Trajectory of Pengolah: From Grassroots to Formal Politics

A distinctive feature of *mengolah* as political methodology is its function as a **structured pathway for political mobility**. Skilled practitioners of *mengolah*, those who master the arts of network cultivation, situational navigation, and reciprocal exchange, typically follow recognizable career trajectories that transform informal grassroots engagement into formal political participation. This progression is widely understood within Indonesian political culture as a legitimate and even desirable evolution of political service.

Table 4 outlines the typical progression pathways for skilled *pengolah* (practitioners of *mengolah*).

Table 4. Career Trajectories of Skilled Pengolah in Indonesian Politics

Stage	Role	Typical Duration	Destination
Entry	Relawan (Volunteer)	1–2 election cycles	Community recognition
Development	Koordinator RT/Kelurahan	2–4 years	Local leadership
Consolidation	Pengurus Ormas/LSM	3–5 years	Organizational authority
Professional	Tim Sukses Kandidat	2–3 election cycles	Provincial/National network
Institutional	Kader Partai Politik	5–10 years	Formal political position
Leadership	Caleg/Pejabat Publik	Variable	Elected/appointed office

Source: Author’s interviews with 120 political activists and party cadres, 2024.

This trajectory demonstrates that *mengolah* functions as **political apprenticeship**, a medium through which aspiring political actors acquire the skills, networks, and legitimacy necessary for formal political participation. The movement from informal *mengolah* to formal party membership or organizational leadership is not a corruption of grassroots politics but rather its maturation into institutional forms.

Integration with Organisasi Masyarakat (Ormas): A significant proportion of skilled *pengolah* eventually assume leadership roles in *organisasi masyarakat* (mass organizations). These organizations, ranging from religious associations (NU, Muhammadiyah) to youth groups (Pemuda Pancasila, GMNI) to professional associations, provide structured vehicles for the continued exercise of *mengolah* skills within frameworks that combine social service with political influence [33]. Survey data indicate that approximately 45% of youth political brokers who participated in the 2024 elections subsequently joined or increased their involvement in formal ormas within six months of the election. This trajectory reflects what Antlov [34] identifies as the integration of informal community leadership with formal organizational structures, a process that strengthens both grassroots connectivity and institutional legitimacy.

Party Cadre Development: Political parties in Indonesia actively recruit successful grassroots brokers as party cadres [36]. The Indonesian party system, despite its weaknesses in ideological differentiation, provides institutional pathways for skilled *pengolah* to transition from campaign volunteers to party officials. This recruitment serves a dual function: for the individual, it offers career progression and institutional legitimacy; for the party, it ensures that grassroots connectivity and relational knowledge are incorporated into party structures. As Beittinger-Lee [35] notes, this dynamic reflects the unique character of Indonesian civil society, where the boundaries between formal political institutions and informal social organizations remain fluid and mutually constitutive.

4.4. Gender and Mengolah

While much of the visible political brokerage in Indonesia is conducted by men, women play crucial roles in the ecology of *mengolah* through what scholars have termed “backstage politics” [28]. Women’s involvement in community organizations, religious activities, and neighborhood social networks positions them as key nodes in the information and influence networks that make *mengolah* possible.

The 2024 elections saw increased efforts by political parties to recruit women as brokers, recognizing their influence in household decision-making and community opinion formation. This represents a significant shift from earlier patterns where women’s political participation was largely confined to auxiliary roles in party women’s wings.

5. Digital Mengolah: The Transformation of Grassroots Politics in the Social Media Era

5.1. The TikTok Election Phenomenon

The 2024 Indonesian elections, widely characterized as Indonesia’s first “TikTok election,” marked a significant transformation in how *mengolah* is practiced [25]. With 99.1 million Indonesian users aged 18 and above on TikTok, the second-largest national user base globally after the United States, the platform became a primary arena for political engagement, particularly among Gen Z voters [32].

The dominance of TikTok in political communication reflects broader shifts in Indonesian media consumption patterns. As Table 5 illustrates, social media platforms have become central to how young Indonesians engage with political information and participate in political discourse.

Table 5. Social Media Usage for Political Engagement Among Indonesian Youth (18–35 years)

Platform	Users (millions)	Used for Politics (%)	Primary Function
TikTok	99.1	67%	Short political videos, viral content
Instagram	88.4	45%	Political stories, influencer campaigns
X (Twitter)	24.2	52%	Real-time commentary, hashtag activism
Facebook	136.7	28%	Community groups, older demographics
YouTube	139.0	41%	Long-form political content, debates
WhatsApp	157.3	73%	Group discussions, rumor dissemination

Source: Compiled from We Are Social [32], Mafindo [18], and author’s survey data.

5.2. Platform Political Dynamics

Each social media platform has developed distinct political affordances that shape how *mengolah* is practiced in digital spaces:

TikTok: The platform’s algorithm-driven content distribution and emphasis on short-form video created new opportunities for viral political content. Political “influencers” (*konten kreator politik*) emerged as key intermediaries, building massive followings through relatable political commentary that blended humor, popular music, and political messaging. The most successful political accounts, such as those supporting Ganjar Pranowo and Ridwan Kamil, amassed over 5 million followers each, effectively functioning as digital brokerages that translated elite political messages into formats accessible to young audiences.

Instagram: The platform’s emphasis on visual aesthetics facilitated what analysts termed the “K-popification” of Indonesian politics [16], namely the application of fan culture practices to political engagement. Supporters of presidential candidates created elaborate visual content, organized “streaming parties” for campaign videos, and deployed the language of fandom (“bias,” “OTP,” “comeback”) in political discourse.

WhatsApp: While less visible than public social media platforms, WhatsApp remained the crucial infrastructure for grassroots *mengolah*. Neighborhood groups (*grup RT/RW*), alumni networks, and family chats served as channels for political rumor, campaign material distribution, and mobilization calls. The encrypted nature of WhatsApp communications provided a degree of privacy for *mengolah* activities that public social media could not offer.

5.3. Disinformation and the Dark Side of Digital Mengolah

The digital transformation of *mengolah* has not been without negative consequences. The same affordances that enabled grassroots political mobilization also facilitated the mass dissemination of disinformation. According to data from Masyarakat Antifitnah Indonesia (Mafindo), a fact-checking organization, the volume of political hoaxes increased dramatically in the lead-up to the 2024 elections [18].

Table 6. Political Hoax Distribution by Platform (2023–2024)

Platform	Percentage of Hoaxes	Primary Content Type
YouTube	44.6%	Video content, deepfakes
Facebook	34.4%	Image macros, false news articles
TikTok	9.3%	Misleading short videos
X (Twitter)	8.0%	Viral text posts, manipulated images
WhatsApp	1.5%	Forwarded messages, audio clips
Instagram	1.4%	Edited images, stories

Source: Mafindo [18]

The prevalence of AI-generated content, including deepfake videos of political figures speaking in foreign languages and fabricated audio recordings, presented new challenges for political information integrity. The emergence of these technologies has transformed *mengolah* into a field where the line between genuine relationship-building and deceptive manipulation has become increasingly blurred.

5.4. Algorithmic Politics and the Commodification of Influence

The platformization of *mengolah* has introduced new dynamics of political influence that differ fundamentally from traditional brokerage relationships. Platform algorithms, rather than personal relationships, increasingly mediate which political content reaches which audiences. This has created what scholars have termed “algorithmic clientelism”, a system in which political influence is purchased through advertising and content promotion rather than cultivated through personal exchange [30].

However, Indonesian political actors have adapted to these new conditions by developing hybrid strategies that combine algorithmic manipulation with traditional relationship-based *mengolah*. Successful digital campaigns in 2024 typically involved:

1. **Influencer Recruitment:** Identifying and compensating social media influencers to promote political content to their established audiences.
2. **Content Seeding:** Creating “organic”-appearing content that could be amplified through algorithmic promotion.
3. **Astrourfing:** Organizing coordinated campaigns to create the appearance of grassroots support for particular candidates or positions.
4. **Cross-Platform Migration:** Moving content and audiences across platforms (e.g., from TikTok discovery to WhatsApp groups for deeper mobilization).

6. Mengolah as Method: Implications for Political Research

6.1. Epistemological Positioning

Adopting *mengolah* as a methodological framework requires researchers to position themselves differently within the research process. Traditional political science research often maintains a fiction of researcher detachment, the neutral observer documenting political phenomena from a position of scholarly distance. A *mengolah*-informed methodology, by contrast, acknowledges the impossibility of such detachment and embraces the researcher’s embeddedness in social relationships as a source of knowledge.

This approach resonates with what Moreton-Robinson [19] terms “relationality” in indigenous research methodologies, the recognition that knowledge emerges through relationships rather than detached observation. For researchers studying Indonesian politics, this means engaging in the same processes of relationship-building, reciprocal exchange, and situational navigation that characterize *mengolah* itself.

6.2. Research Practices

Drawing on the author's experience conducting fieldwork for this study, several research practices emerge from a *mengolah*-informed methodology:

Extended Presence: Rather than brief, structured interview sessions, *mengolah*-informed research requires extended presence in research sites, including spending time at coffee stalls, attending religious gatherings, and participating in community activities. Knowledge emerges from these sustained interactions rather than from formal interview protocols.

Reciprocal Engagement: Researchers must be prepared to engage in the reciprocal exchanges that *mengolah* requires. This may involve providing assistance with bureaucratic processes, sharing information, or contributing to community activities. Such exchanges are not "bribes" or "corruption" but the normal currency of social relationships in Indonesia.

Multi-Sited Observation: Following the multiplex nature of *mengolah*, research should span multiple social domains, tracking how political relationships operate across family, religious, economic, and recreational contexts.

Digital Ethnography: Given the importance of social media in contemporary Indonesian politics, research must incorporate digital ethnography, observing online interactions, analyzing social media content, and understanding how digital and offline *mengolah* interact.

6.3. Ethical Considerations

Research conducted through a *mengolah* framework raises distinct ethical considerations. The informal, relational nature of *mengolah* complicates conventional research ethics protocols designed for formal, transactional research relationships. Consent in *mengolah* is often implicit and ongoing rather than explicit and time-bound. The reciprocal exchanges that characterize *mengolah* may blur the boundaries between research and participation in political activities.

Researchers must navigate these complexities with sensitivity to local ethical norms while maintaining commitments to transparency and respect for research participants. This requires ongoing dialogue with research participants about the purposes and uses of research, rather than relying solely on one-time informed consent procedures.

7. Conclusion

Mengolah represents more than a curious local practice; it offers a window into how politics actually operates in Indonesia and, by extension, in many postcolonial democracies where formal institutions are weak and informal relationships structure access to power. By centering *mengolah* as a legitimate object of scholarly inquiry and methodological framework, this article contributes to the broader project of decolonizing political science.

The 2024 Indonesian elections demonstrated both the continued vitality of *mengolah* as a political methodology and its transformation in the digital age. Young Indonesian political actors have adapted the logics of *mengolah*, namely relational trust, reciprocal exchange, and situational navigation, to new technological environments, creating hybrid forms of grassroots political engagement that challenge conventional distinctions between online and offline politics.

Understanding *mengolah* is not merely an academic exercise; it has practical implications for how we think about democratic participation, political accountability, and civic education in Indonesia and similar contexts. Development programs and democratic assistance efforts that ignore the centrality of informal political practices like *mengolah* are likely to fail, as they address formal institutions that may not be the primary sites where political decisions are actually made.

Future research should continue to develop the conceptual vocabulary for understanding informal political practices across different cultural contexts, moving beyond the Western-centric frameworks that have dominated political science. By taking seriously the epistemologies embedded in local political practices, scholars can contribute to a more genuinely global discipline that recognizes the diversity of ways in which humans organize and contest power.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the focus on youth political engagement in the 2024 elections means that the analysis may not fully capture how *mengolah* operates among older political actors or in non-electoral contexts. Second, the reliance on survey and interview data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly regarding sensitive topics such as vote buying and patronage exchange. Third, the rapid evolution of digital platforms means that the specific configurations of digital *mengolah* described here may already be changing.

Future research should examine how *mengolah* operates in different regional contexts within Indonesia, how it functions in local rather than national elections, and how it is practiced by women and marginalized communities. Comparative research examining similar informal political methodologies in other Southeast Asian contexts, such as the *tambuyong* in the Philippines or *jai yen* in Thailand, would also contribute to the development of more robust theoretical frameworks that center indigenous political epistemologies.

Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking the career trajectories of skilled *pengolah* would illuminate how informal political apprenticeship translates into formal political leadership, and what implications this has for the quality and responsiveness of democratic representation in Indonesia.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

KPU	Komisi Pemilihan Umum (General Elections Commission)
Mafindo	Masyarakat Antifitnah Indonesia (Indonesian Anti-Defamation Society)
RT/RW	Rukun Tetangga/Rukun Warga (Neighborhood/Village Units)
Gen Z	Generation Z (born 1997–2012)
DPT	Daftar Pemilih Tetap (Permanent Voters List)
PDI-P	Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle)
PKS	Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (Prosperous Justice Party)

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