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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Legislators as bridges of democracy: Communication, constituency, and participatory development in Medan city council

Muhammada Afri Rizki Lubis^{1*} , Marlon Sihombing¹, Humaizi¹ & Hatta Ridho¹

¹Faculty Of Political and Social Science, Universitas Sumatera Utara

*Correspondence: muhammadafririzkil@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Legislators fulfill a pivotal role in democratic governance, serving not only as policymakers but also as communicators who mediate between citizens and institutions. In Indonesia's decentralized system, local legislatures (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, atau DVD) are expected to serve as a conduit between community aspirations and government policies, thereby ensuring that development planning is participatory and accountable. This study examines the communication practices of the Golkar faction in the Medan City Council during the 2019–2023 legislative period, focusing on how legislators act as bridges of democracy in fostering participatory development.

A qualitative descriptive design was employed, combining in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The data were analyzed in accordance with the reduction, display, and verification model proposed by Miles and Huberman. To enhance the validity of the findings, a triangulation approach was employed. The informants included legislators, constituents across electoral districts, community leaders, and government officials involved in development planning.

The findings indicate that legislators adopted a cyclical communication model characterized by continuous interaction between constituents, legislators, and government agencies. Communication was facilitated through both formal and informal channels. The formal channels included reses and musrenbang, while the informal channels encompassed social media and community meetings. Legislators functioned as advocates, translating citizen aspirations into policy proposals. They also served as educators, enhancing political literacy, and as mediators, facilitating accountability. Nevertheless, challenges persisted, including fiscal limitations, unequal participation due to the digital divide, and entrenched practices of money politics.

This study makes a theoretical contribution by extending models of participatory democracy through the identification of a cyclical, dialogical communication framework. In practice, it provides insights for enhancing local democracy in Indonesia by demonstrating how legislators can institutionalize participatory communication to improve inclusiveness, transparency, and citizen trust.

KEYWORDS: constituency engagement, Indonesia, legislative communication, local governance, Medan city council, participatory democracy

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1. Introduction

Democratic governance is measured not only by elections and institutional frameworks but also by the quality of communication between representatives and their constituencies. Legislators serve as crucial intermediaries who translate citizens' voices into public policy, acting as bridges of democracy in connecting the state with society. In Indonesia's decentralized political system, local legislatures (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah* or DPRD) play an increasingly strategic role in ensuring that development planning is inclusive, participatory, and accountable (Tshishonga, 2023).

The city of Medan, as one of Indonesia's largest metropolitan areas, illustrates the complexities of democratic governance in an urban setting. Rapid urbanization, socio-economic disparities, and political contestation create growing demands for local leaders to adopt responsive and participatory approaches to policymaking. During the 2019–2023 legislative period, the Golkar faction, one of Indonesia's most established political parties, held four seats in the Medan City Council. This positioned the party as a significant actor in shaping participatory development, particularly in a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted conventional communication mechanisms and necessitated innovative forms of constituency engagement (Qodir, 2023).

Existing literature highlights several key aspects of legislative communication. Constituency offices are essential channels for representatives to disseminate policy information and maintain dialogue with citizens, thereby ensuring democratic inclusion (Tshishonga, 2023). In the Indonesian context, legislators often engage in social communication activities, such as campaign events and the provision of social assistance, which can strengthen ties with voters but also risk reinforcing transactional political practices (Parji & Prasetya, 2020). At the same time, participatory democracy emphasizes the need for citizens' involvement not only during elections but also in pre-decision making, strategic planning, and community goal setting, often facilitated by civil society organizations (Reisinger, 2010). However, councillors' attitudes toward participation remain divided; while some perceive it as a threat to formal political processes, others acknowledge its importance in strengthening local governance (Sweeting & Copus, 2013).

Research on Indonesian local democracy also underscores persistent challenges. The dynamics of regional head candidate selection in Medan, for example, demonstrate the influence of identity politics, money politics, and central government intervention, which often undermine inclusiveness and transparency (Ikhsan, Subhilhar, Kusmanto, & Nasution, 2024). Moreover, while digital democracy offers new opportunities for engagement, its implementation in Indonesia continues to face obstacles such as limited internet coverage and digital divides, which exacerbate inequalities in political participation (Qodir, 2023). In contrast, studies in Europe show that higher engagement in participatory democracy among local councillors correlates with stronger community trust and perceptions of responsiveness, reinforcing the potential benefits of participatory practices (Bucaite-Vilke, Lazauskiene, Baranauskiene, & Dryzaite, 2025). Transparency is another critical factor, as public information disclosure plays a dominant role in bridging the gap between government performance and citizens' expectations (Wahanisa, Riyanto, Adiyatma, & Rouf, 2023).

Despite this growing body of literature, there remain significant research gaps. Few studies have examined how specific party factions within Indonesian city councils manage legislative communication in ways that influence participatory development. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how legislators adapted their communication strategies during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional face-to-face mechanisms were disrupted and digital alternatives became necessary.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how the Golkar faction in the Medan City Council functioned as a bridge of democracy during the 2019–2023 period. It examines how legislators communicated with their constituencies, the extent to which such communication contributed to participatory development planning, and what communication models can be identified as most effective for strengthening democratic governance at the local level. By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to the broader debates on political communication, participatory democracy, and local governance, while also offering practical insights into how legislators can enhance inclusiveness, accountability, and transparency in urban democratic settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political Communication and Constituency Engagement

Legislative communication is foundational to democratic representation because it enables continuous exchange of preferences between elected officials and citizens. Classic accounts of representation remind us that “acting for” requires both authorization and accountability, which are sustained through communication (Pitkin, 1967). In practice, constituency-facing infrastructures—constituency offices, public hearings, and field visits—help translate citizen concerns into legislative agendas while increasing visibility and responsiveness (Tshishonga, 2023). Yet, as studies of Indonesian campaigns show, community outreach and social assistance can blur into transactional exchanges that risk weakening democratic accountability (Parji & Prasetya, 2020). At the same time, deliberative traditions emphasize reason-giving and reciprocity in political talk (Habermas, 1996; Mansbridge et al., 2012), aligning with two-way, dialogical interactions between councillors and constituents documented in local settings (Sweeting & Copus, 2013; Bucaite-Vilke et al., 2025).

2.2 Participatory Democracy and Development

Participation can improve policy fit and legitimacy when citizens are engaged before decisions are made—not merely consulted *ex post* (Reisinger, 2010). Canonical work maps gradations of participation from manipulation to citizen control (Arnstein, 1969), while later syntheses show that invited spaces can empower citizens when design and power relations are favorable (Cornwall, 2008). Comparative frameworks outline diverse “democratic innovations” that connect lay publics to decision-making across agenda-setting, consultation, and co-production (Fung, 2006). In Indonesia, decentralization opened room for community input; however, outcomes depend on facilitation quality, information flows, and inclusion of marginalized groups (Amalia & Firdaus, 2017; Antlöv, Wetterberg, & Dharmawan, 2016).

2.3 Challenges of Local Democracy in Indonesia

Local governance in Indonesia still contends with clientelism, identity politics, and elite bargaining that can crowd out participatory ideals (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Ikhsan, Subhilhar, Kusmanto, & Nasution, 2024). Studies of *musrenbang* reveal uneven uptake and limited influence when participation is symbolic or when budget ceilings pre-empt citizen priorities (Widianingsih & McCourt, 2012; Sopanah, 2012). These frictions echo broader concerns about democratic deficits in representative systems under stress (Norris, 2011). Sustained improvements typically require stronger transparency institutions, public information disclosure, and iterative feedback loops between councils, agencies, and communities (Wahanisa, Riyanto, Adiyatma, & Rouf, 2023; Fox, 2015).

2.4 Digital Democracy and E-Participation

Digital channels expand opportunities for contact, visibility, and rapid feedback between citizens and legislators, but effects are contingent on digital literacy and access (Qodir, 2023). Evidence on e-participation shows that online tools can widen deliberative venues and lower transaction costs when embedded in institutional processes (Macintosh, 2004; Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Yet digital contention can also amplify noise and inequalities, producing turbulent participation that is episodic and skewed toward already-connected groups (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2015). Indonesian cases show how platform use by councillors (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram) increases responsiveness, but digital divides and infrastructural gaps keep many citizens at the margins (Firmansyah, 2022; Qodir, 2023).

2.5 The Mediating Role of Local Politicians

Local politicians often operate as brokers who translate dispersed preferences into programmatic proposals. Where councillors adopt participatory practices, perceptions of trust, inclusion, and responsiveness tend to rise (Bucaite-Vilke et al., 2025). Social-accountability research adds that repeated cycles of information, justification, and sanction—amplified by civic groups—can realign bureaucratic incentives toward citizen-centred outcomes (Fox, 2015; Gaventa & Barrett, 2012). In Indonesia, decentralization created multiple entry points for such brokering—*reses*, *pokir*, hearings—yet brokerage quality varies with norms, party incentives, and fiscal constraints (Antlöv et al., 2016; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

2.6 Transparency, Disclosure, and Learning Loops

Transparency institutions are critical complements to participation: when legislative actions and budget flows are visible, citizens can evaluate claims and press for redress (Wahanisa et al., 2023; Fox, 2015). Deliberative systems scholarship argues that participation, representation, and publicity must be connected in a system-level architecture so that voice travels from peripheral forums to authoritative arenas and back (Mansbridge et al., 2012). This aligns with cyclical communication models in which constituents → legislators → implementing agencies → constituents form iterative learning loops, closing gaps between needs, policies, and outcomes (Fung, 2006; Cornwall, 2008).

3. Methodology

The present study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, a method that is frequently utilized in the social sciences to capture the nuances of communication practices and social interactions comprehensively. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for exploring how legislators mediate between citizens and institutions in shaping participatory development (Adimihardja, 2003; Afib, 2011).

3.1 Research Site and Context

The fieldwork was conducted in Medan City, North Sumatra, with a focus on the activities of the Golkar faction within the City Council during the 2019–2023 legislative term. Medan was selected as a case study because of its unique urban governance challenges—namely, rapid population growth, socio-economic inequality, and complex political contestation—that necessitate strong legislative communication (DPRD Kota Medan, 2022).

3.2 Informants and Sampling

The research used purposive sampling to ensure the selection of informants with direct relevance to the study's objectives. Informants were categorized into three groups:

1. Key informants – members of the Golkar faction of Medan City Council;
2. Main informants – constituents from multiple electoral districts (*dapil*) who actively participated in legislative activities such as *reses* and *musrenbang*;
3. Supporting informants – community leaders, NGO representatives, and government officials involved in participatory planning.

This sampling strategy followed the logic of qualitative inquiry, where information-rich cases are prioritized over numerical representation (Budiono, 2025; Lase, 2025).

3.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered using three complementary methods:

- In-depth interviews, conducted with legislators, constituents, and community leaders to obtain firsthand perspectives on communication and participatory development (Amalia & Firdaus, 2017).
- Participant observation, especially during legislative recess sessions, development planning forums, and council outreach programs, to observe communicative dynamics in practice (Firmansyah, 2022).
- Document analysis, including policy documents, meeting records, and media coverage, to provide contextual evidence and triangulation (DPRD Kota Medan, 2022).

3.4 Data Analysis

The research adopted the Miles and Huberman model of qualitative analysis, which consists of three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This iterative process enabled the researcher to refine categories and themes, thereby ensuring the credibility and empirical grounding of the findings (Afib, 2011). The triangulation of sources was a methodological decision made to enhance the reliability of the results obtained.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study's design and execution adhered to rigorous ethical protocols, ensuring the well-being of the subjects and the integrity of the research process. Prior to participation, all subjects were briefed on the objective of the research study and provided with an informed consent form to indicate their consent to participate. In order to safeguard the confidentiality of the subjects, the reporting of sensitive data was conducted under the use of pseudonyms, and participation in the study was on a strictly voluntary basis. The study adhered to the institutional ethical standards for qualitative research as outlined by Adimihardja (2003).

4. Results

4.1 Communication Practices of Legislators

The findings indicate that members of the Golkar faction of the Medan City Council (2019–2023) employed diverse strategies to communicate with their constituencies. Institutionalized channels such as *reses* (legislative recess sessions) and *musrenbang* (development planning forums) were utilized as formal mechanisms for the collection of aspirations. During recesses, legislators undertook visits to electoral districts (*dapil*) for the purpose of listening to grievances, collecting proposals, and explaining government policies. In a similar vein, the *musrenbang* initiative established a systematic framework that enabled community members to participate in the formulation of local development programs. In addition to these institutional mechanisms, informal channels were also prominent. Legislators have increasingly utilized WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and direct meetings at community events to maintain continuous dialogue. These informal mechanisms enabled real-time responses and reinforced perceptions of accessibility (Tshishonga, 2023; Parji & Prasetya, 2020).

4.2 Two-Way and Reciprocal Communication

The study revealed that communication between legislators and citizens was predominantly two-way and dialogical. Legislators did not merely disseminate policy information; they also actively listened to and integrated citizen input into legislative debates. The aspirations that had been amassed during the course of the *reses* were formalized in the *Pokok-Pokok Pikiran DPRD* (*Pokir*), which in turn influenced budgetary discussions. Following the implementation of these policies, legislators returned to their respective communities to disseminate the outcomes and solicit feedback. This established a cyclical model of communication, whereby citizens articulated their aspirations, legislators promoted policies, government agencies executed programs, and citizens appraised the outcomes (Sweeting & Copus, 2013; Reisinger, 2010). This cycle has been demonstrated to enhance accountability, thereby transforming citizens from passive recipients into active participants in governance.

4.3 Legislative Role in Participatory Development

Beyond their representative function, legislators positioned themselves as advocates and mediators of participatory development. During the course of the pandemic, legislators were tasked with the responsibility of overseeing the distribution of social assistance, facilitating open dialogues with affected households, and conducting a thorough examination of health budget allocations. These actions exemplified the role of legislators in empowering citizens to directly assess government performance, thereby anchoring accountability into the democratic process. Furthermore, legislators assumed an educational role, elucidating budgetary constraints, policy priorities, and the mechanisms of local governance. This contributed to enhancing citizens' political literacy (Ikhsan, Subhilhar, Kusmanto, & Nasution, 2024).

4.4 Constraints in Communication

Notwithstanding these positive developments, the study identified several constraints. The financial constraints imposed by the Medan City budget significantly constrained the capacity of legislators to realize the full scope of their objectives. Participation was also found to be uneven, with middle-class citizens who had access to digital platforms engaging more actively than marginalized groups, who often lacked internet connectivity or political literacy. Furthermore, structural issues such as identity politics, money politics, and elite bargaining persist as significant barriers, corroborating broader findings on Indonesia's local democracy (Ikhsan et al., 2024; Qodir, 2023). These constraints underscore the persistent challenges associated with integrating participatory principles into governance practices.

4.5 Emergent Communication Model

A participatory political communication model was developed from the synthesis of findings to describe the role of legislators as “bridges of democracy.” The model is comprised of four stages. Firstly, aspirations are gathered through *reses*, *musrenbang*, and digital forums. Secondly, aspirations are integrated into council debates and budget proposals to facilitate policy advocacy. Thirdly, government agencies implement and socialize programs. Finally, citizens provide feedback and evaluate the program. This cyclical model reflects continuous interaction between constituents, legislators, and local government agencies (SKPD), thereby reinforcing both accountability and inclusiveness (Bucaite-Vilke, Lazauskiene, Baranauskiene, & Dryzaite, 2025; Wahanisa, Riyanto, Adiyatma, & Rouf, 2023).

The findings confirm that Golkar legislators in Medan acted not only as representatives but also as communicators, educators, and mediators. While persistent challenges such as fiscal constraints and clientelistic practices remain, the study underscores the potential of participatory communication to strengthen democratic governance at the local level by institutionalizing two-way dialogue, transparency, and citizen involvement.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that legislators in the Golkar faction of the Medan City Council played a pivotal role as communicators and mediators, thereby functioning as bridges of democracy. The communication process was not confined to a top-down dissemination of information; rather, it was structured as a reciprocal process in which aspirations were collected, transformed into policy inputs, and subsequently evaluated through citizen feedback. This cyclical model of communication finds resonance with theories of participatory democracy, which underscore citizen involvement not only in elections but also in the entire cycle of governance, including planning, implementation, and monitoring (Reisinger, 2010; Sweeting & Copus, 2013). The present study lends further support to the findings of prior research, which underscores the pivotal role of constituency offices and forums in enhancing representation (Tshishonga, 2023). In the Medan case, however, legislators sought to broaden communication beyond formal structures by leveraging digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. This adaptation is indicative of broader trends toward digital democracy in Indonesia, where online platforms are being used with increasing frequency for political participation (Qodir, 2023). However, as indicated by the findings, the digital divide persists as a significant impediment. While middle-class groups were actively engaged through online channels, marginalized communities were left behind due to poor internet access and limited digital literacy. This finding aligns with global critiques that digitalization, while promising, risks reproducing inequality rather than eliminating it (Ikhsan, Subhilhar, Kusmanto, & Nasution, 2024).

The role of legislators as educators also emerged strongly in this study. By explaining fiscal constraints and governance processes, legislators enhanced citizens’ political literacy. This aligns with the argument that participatory democracy is not merely about providing opportunities for citizens to speak but also about equipping them with knowledge to engage effectively (Bucaite-Vilke, Lazauskiene, Baranauskiene, & Dryzaite, 2025). In Medan, the educational function of legislators helped citizens understand why some aspirations could not be fully realized and how priorities were ranked. This transparency created more realistic expectations and fostered trust between citizens and representatives.

At the same time, the study exposed persistent structural challenges. Money politics, identity politics, and elite bargaining practices continue to undermine participatory ideals in Medan. These findings mirror other research on Indonesian local politics, which has shown that formal democratic mechanisms are often overshadowed by informal and transactional practices (Ikhsan et al., 2024). Despite these barriers, the ability of legislators to sustain two-way communication with their constituencies demonstrates that participatory democracy can still be fostered at the local level, provided that representatives remain committed to inclusivity and accountability.

A particularly significant contribution of this study is the identification of a cyclical communication model specific to the Medan context. Unlike linear models of political communication, where information flows from government to citizens, the Medan model emphasizes a feedback loop: citizens voice concerns, legislators mediate and advocate, government agencies implement, and citizens evaluate. This loop enhances democratic accountability by ensuring that policy is not only formulated with citizen input but also subject to citizen scrutiny. It aligns with Wahanisa, Riyanto, Adiyatma, and Rouf’s (2023) findings on the importance of public

information disclosure in bridging the gap between government actions and public expectations.

These findings contribute to the broader discourse on local democracy in developing countries. They demonstrate that while structural constraints remain, local actors—particularly legislators—can innovate in their communicative roles to strengthen participatory governance. In the Indonesian context, where decentralization has devolved significant power to local governments, the ability of city councillors to function as communicative bridges is vital. By institutionalizing dialogical and participatory communication, the Golkar faction in Medan exemplified how local legislatures can embed democratic practices into everyday governance, even in the face of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In sum, the discussion highlights that communication, participation, and transparency are mutually reinforcing pillars of democratic governance. Legislators who embrace these elements not only enhance their own legitimacy but also contribute to building stronger, more inclusive institutions. The Medan case demonstrates that despite fiscal, political, and technological challenges, participatory communication remains a powerful tool for strengthening democracy at the local level.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the role of legislators in the Golkar faction of the Medan City Council (2019–2023) as communicators and mediators in fostering participatory development. The findings demonstrate that legislators did not merely act as policy-makers but functioned as bridges of democracy, connecting citizens and government institutions through communication practices that were dialogical, cyclical, and participatory. Communication occurred through both formal mechanisms—such as *reses* and *musrenbang*—and informal channels, including social media platforms and community gatherings. Importantly, the research highlighted that communication was not one-directional; instead, it was structured as a feedback loop where aspirations were gathered, translated into policy proposals, implemented through government agencies, and later evaluated by citizens.

The study further revealed that legislators played multiple roles: advocates who brought citizen concerns into formal political debates, educators who improved citizens' political literacy, and mediators who bridged institutional decisions with community expectations. However, challenges persisted, including fiscal constraints, unequal participation due to the digital divide, and entrenched practices of money politics and elite bargaining. These findings underscore that while the potential of participatory communication is significant, its realization is conditioned by structural and cultural contexts that may hinder inclusiveness and transparency.

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The present study makes a theoretical contribution to the existing body of literature on political communication and participatory democracy by offering empirical evidence from a local governance context in Indonesia. It extends previous models of political communication (Reisinger, 2010; Sweeting & Copus, 2013) by proposing a cyclical communication model that emphasizes reciprocity and accountability. The Medan case demonstrates that legislators function not only as conduits of information but also as active participants in the shaping of participatory processes. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of legislative communication in developing democracies.

6.2 Practical Implications

In essence, the study provides significant insights for policymakers, legislators, and civil society actors. The findings underscore the significance of maintaining continuous two-way communication and of embracing the roles of educators and mediators. The research indicates that participatory planning mechanisms, such as *musrenbang*, can be more effective when complemented by informal and digital communication platforms. This combination allows for the extension of reach to a wider spectrum of society. For civil society organizations, the study underscores the potential for collaboration with legislators to enhance political literacy and ensure the inclusion of marginalized groups in participatory processes.

6.3 Concluding Remark

The case of Medan offers a compelling illustration of the challenges and opportunities associated with the enhancement of democratic institutions at the local level. Notwithstanding fiscal limitations, clientelistic

practices, and technological inequalities, legislators who institutionalize participatory communication can enhance accountability, build citizen trust, and ensure that development planning reflects the community's needs. By functioning as conduits of democracy, legislators can transcend the limitations of symbolic representation and meaningfully contribute to the advancement of participatory governance in Indonesia.

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