



Preventing Corruption and Patronage through Political Party Finance Reform

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ABSTRACT

Political parties are fundamental to democratic governance, yet in Indonesia they remain vulnerable to money politics, corruption, and patronage despite the existence of an advanced legal framework. This study analyzes political party finance reform as a structural strategy to address the persistent gap between normative regulations and political reality. Using a normative legal research method with a prescriptive approach, the research examines statutory provisions, legal doctrines, scholarly literature, and international standards related to party financing. The analysis shows that corruption and patronage within political parties are driven by weak financial accountability, limited public funding, opaque reporting systems, and inadequate independent oversight. These structural weaknesses encourage dependence on oligarchic donors and sustain patron-client relationships that distort internal party democracy and public policy. The study argues that effective corruption prevention requires comprehensive reform of political party financing, including strengthened accountability mechanisms, expanded public funding, digital transparency, and independent supervision. Such reforms can reduce sponsor-driven influence, promote merit-based cadre recruitment, and enhance democratic integrity, positioning political parties as credible and professional institutions within Indonesia's democratic system.

Keywords : *Political party finance; Corruption prevention; Patronage; Money politics; Democracy*



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INTRODUCTION

Political parties constitute the backbone of modern democratic systems, functioning as key institutions for political recruitment, interest aggregation, and the articulation of public policy. Through political parties, democratic competition is organized, leadership is selected, and citizen participation is institutionalized. In an ideal democratic setting, parties operate as programmatic organizations guided by ideology, accountability, and public interest (Power, 2018). In the Indonesian context, however, political parties are widely perceived as institutions that are inherently vulnerable to corruption, patronage, and oligarchic influence (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). This perception has been reinforced by repeated corruption scandals involving party elites, vote-buying practices, and transactional politics in candidate nomination processes. These patterns indicate deep structural weaknesses rather than isolated individual misconduct (Hicken & Nathan, 2020).

A central source of these vulnerabilities lies in the flawed system of political party financing. Political parties require substantial financial resources to maintain organizational activities, conduct cadre training, and compete in elections (Muhtadi, n.d.). Yet legitimate and sustainable funding sources remain limited. As a result, parties develop a heavy dependence on large private donors, informal funding channels, and unreported contributions, creating fertile ground for corruption and patronage networks. The dominance of big donors in party financing fundamentally distorts democratic representation. Financial contributors with significant economic power gain privileged access to party leaders and influence strategic decisions, including candidate selection and policy orientation (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). This dynamic facilitates state capture, where public policies are shaped to serve private economic interests rather than the broader electorate. Political competition increasingly reflects financial strength rather than ideas, competence, or public support.

At the same time, contributions from party members are weak and largely symbolic. Low levels of ideological attachment, declining public trust, and limited internal democracy discourage grassroots

participation in party financing (Hasibuan, 2021). Membership dues, which in many established democracies function as a stabilizing source of party income, play a marginal role in Indonesia. This imbalance consolidates elite control and weakens internal accountability mechanisms. Public funding for political parties has been introduced as a corrective measure, yet its scale remains insufficient (Toloh, 2023). State assistance is unable to cover basic operational and electoral costs, forcing parties to continue seeking private funding. In the absence of adequate public support, regulatory restrictions on private donations become difficult to enforce, as parties justify informal practices as necessary for survival (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2017).

Transparency and internal financial oversight further exacerbate these problems. Financial reporting by political parties is often incomplete, inaccessible, or delayed. Internal audits lack independence, and external oversight mechanisms suffer from limited authority and weak enforcement. Sanctions for violations of party finance regulations are rarely applied in a consistent and deterrent manner, allowing non-compliance to persist as a normalized practice (Mietzner, 2018). An additional and often overlooked issue concerns the absence of ethical screening in party fundraising. As political organizations grounded in ideology and public responsibility, parties should apply normative criteria when accepting financial contributions (Juniar, 2022). In practice, funding is frequently accepted without scrutiny of donors' social, environmental, or economic impact. Contributions from oligarchic actors involved in environmentally destructive or extractive industries undermine party credibility and compromise policy commitments (Buehler, 2016).

Existing scholarship has addressed various dimensions of corruption and governance within political parties. Research by Hisbul Luthfi Ashsyarofi highlights the critical role of transparency and accountability in party financing as tools for corruption prevention. Using a normative legal framework, this study underscores the importance of clear reporting standards, while leaving questions regarding structural enforcement largely unexplored. Other studies emphasize internal party democracy as a mechanism to curb oligarchic control. Afif Juniar's comparative analysis of party recruitment and cadre formation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and South Korea demonstrates how institutionalized internal processes can reduce elite domination. These findings suggest that organizational design matters, though they do not directly address the financial foundations that shape internal power relations.

The importance of financial transparency is reinforced by Arfiani and Syofiarti, who argue that comprehensive financial disclosure and strict sanctions are essential to preventing corruption within parties. Their work strengthens the case for regulatory reform but focuses primarily on compliance mechanisms rather than the political economy of party funding. Sri Yuniarti expands the discussion by examining the strategic role of political parties and the risks associated with dependence on external donors. By reviewing state funding models across different countries, this research shows that public financing can reduce donor influence when combined with robust accountability systems. The comparative perspective highlights both opportunities and institutional constraints.

Reza Syawawi further argues that increasing state funding for political parties, coupled with stronger governance standards, can weaken oligarchic control, clientelism, and patronage. This approach frames party finance reform as an integral component of democratic consolidation rather than a narrow technical adjustment. Building on this body of literature, this article introduces a structural approach to corruption prevention by focusing on political party finance reform. Unlike studies that emphasize law enforcement, criminal sanctions, or anti-corruption agencies, this research situates corruption and patronage within a systemic funding framework. It constructs a causal chain linking party financing patterns to elite behavior, patronage practices, and internal democracy deficits, drawing on political economy theory to explain elite incentives.

This study aims to analyze how existing positive law regulates party financing and its capacity to prevent money politics, corruption, and patronage in cadre development. It further examines how comprehensive party finance reform, including increased public funding, limits on private donations, digital transparency mechanisms, and oversight by independent institutions, can function as an effective corruption prevention strategy. The findings demonstrate that corruption and patronage within political parties are structural outcomes of weak financial governance. Without meaningful reform of party financing, anti-corruption efforts remain superficial and fail to address the root causes undermining democratic integrity.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a normative legal research method that examines law as a system of norms and rules rather than its empirical implementation (Watkins & Burton, 2017). The focus lies on law in books, emphasizing how legal norms are formulated, structured, and interconnected within the legal system governing political party financing. This approach is particularly relevant for analyzing corruption prevention strategies that are embedded in regulatory design rather than enforcement practice. Normative legal research places statutory provisions, legal principles, doctrines, and judicial decisions at the center of analysis. In this study, these sources function as secondary legal materials that provide the foundation for evaluating the coherence and adequacy of existing regulations on political party finance. By prioritizing authoritative legal texts, the research seeks to assess whether the normative framework itself is capable of preventing corruption and patronage.

The primary analytical orientation of this research is prescriptive (Barak, 2014). Rather than merely describing existing legal arrangements, the study evaluates unresolved legal problems that continue to undermine accountability in political party financing. Through this approach, the research aims to formulate normative recommendations that reflect both legal rationality and democratic principles, offering solutions that should be adopted to address persistent structural weaknesses. A prescriptive analysis is particularly necessary because existing regulations have not produced effective deterrence against money politics and patronage. Despite the presence of formal rules, corruption continues to occur at the party level, indicating that the problem is not solely one of compliance but also of regulatory design. This research therefore examines how current norms fall short of their intended objectives.

To achieve this, the study employs a statutory approach by systematically reviewing legislation related to political parties and elections. This includes an examination of the Political Party Law and the Election Law, focusing on provisions governing sources of party funding, donation limits, reporting obligations, and sanctions. The statutory approach allows for a detailed assessment of normative consistency and regulatory gaps within the legal framework. In addition to statutory analysis, the research applies a conceptual approach to clarify key legal and political concepts such as patronage, clientelism, political corruption, and party finance accountability. These concepts are not always explicitly defined in legislation, yet they shape the interpretation and implementation of legal norms. Conceptual analysis helps bridge the gap between abstract legal rules and the political realities they seek to regulate.

Secondary legal materials constitute the main data source for this research (Hutchinson & Duncan, 2012). These materials include academic journal articles discussing patronage networks, clientelistic practices, and political corruption, as well as comparative studies on party finance reform. Such literature provides theoretical grounding and comparative insights that enrich the normative evaluation of Indonesian regulations. Reports from international organizations focusing on political party finance and anti-corruption standards also play an important role in the analysis. These documents offer benchmarks and best practices derived from global experience, allowing the study to assess whether Indonesia's regulatory framework aligns with internationally recognized principles of transparency and accountability.

Judicial decisions related to electoral disputes and political party accountability are examined to understand how courts interpret and apply relevant norms. Although normative research does not prioritize empirical outcomes, judicial reasoning provides valuable insight into normative ambiguities and enforcement challenges embedded within existing regulations. The research identifies several legal vacuums concerning transparency and accountability in political party financing. These gaps arise from vague regulatory formulations, limited disclosure requirements, and the absence of effective mechanisms to verify financial reports. Such deficiencies weaken the preventive function of the law and allow informal practices to persist.

Normative inconsistencies between different legal instruments further complicate the regulatory landscape. Provisions governing party finance are often fragmented across multiple laws, creating uncertainty regarding institutional authority and enforcement responsibility. This fragmentation undermines legal certainty and opens space for regulatory avoidance. The study also highlights discrepancies between normative expectations and practical incentives created by the law. While regulations formally prohibit certain funding practices, they fail to address the structural financial

needs of political parties. This mismatch encourages circumvention and reinforces dependence on informal funding channels.

By examining these weaknesses, the research demonstrates that current party finance regulations are not designed to prevent illegal practices effectively. The absence of strong sanctions and independent oversight mechanisms reduces the law's deterrent effect and limits its capacity to shape elite behavior. Through a prescriptive normative analysis, this study formulates recommendations aimed at closing legal gaps and strengthening accountability. These recommendations focus on improving regulatory clarity, enhancing transparency requirements, and integrating independent oversight into the party finance system.

Overall, the normative legal method employed in this research provides a systematic and theory-based framework for understanding corruption and patronage as legal-structural problems. By critically evaluating the existing regulatory architecture, the study contributes to the development of party finance reform as a foundational strategy for preventing political corruption and reinforcing democratic governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The positive legal framework governing political parties and general elections in Indonesia provides a formal foundation for preventing money politics, political corruption, and patronage in party cadre recruitment. This framework is embedded in several key statutes, including the Political Party Law, the General Election Law, the Regional Head Election Law, and the Anti-Corruption Law. Normatively, these laws are designed to construct a clean, accountable, and democratic political order by regulating party organization, funding, and electoral competition (Simanjuntak & al., 2025). The Political Party Law affirms that political parties are not merely electoral vehicles but institutions tasked with political education, cadre recruitment, and interest articulation. By defining these core functions, the law positions parties as agents of democratic development rather than instruments of elite bargaining (Fukuoka, 2017). To prevent unhealthy financial dependence, the law requires parties to uphold principles of transparency and accountability in managing their finances (Shair-Rosenfield & Hicken, 2018).

Financial accountability obligations include the mandatory reporting of party income and expenditure, audits conducted by public accountants, and periodic submission of financial reports to the state. The law also limits permissible sources of funding and seeks to prevent excessive reliance on private donors (Berenschot & Aspinall, 2016). These norms aim to reduce structural dependence on wealthy financiers who may exercise control through patron client relationships. Through this regulatory design, the Political Party Law functions as a preventive instrument against political corruption. By constraining funding sources and mandating disclosure, it attempts to weaken the ability of financial elites to dominate party decision-making and influence cadre selection (Aspinall, 2015). In theory, transparent financing should create space for merit-based recruitment and ideological competition.

The General Election Law further strengthens this preventive framework by explicitly criminalizing money politics. It prohibits candidates, political parties, campaign teams, and affiliated actors from offering or promising money or material benefits to voters (Tomsa, 2019). This prohibition reflects the principle that electoral choice must be based on political preference rather than financial inducement. Sanctions under the General Election Law include administrative penalties and criminal punishment, ranging from candidate disqualification to imprisonment (Muhtadi, 2019). These measures are intended to deter practices that distort voter autonomy and undermine electoral fairness. By limiting the influence of money in elections, the law seeks to prevent post-election corruption driven by obligations to political financiers (Butt & Schütte, 2019). In the context of leadership recruitment, restrictions on money politics are meant to support the selection of candidates with integrity and public legitimacy. Elections free from financial domination are expected to produce leaders who are less vulnerable to patronage pressures and more accountable to citizens.

The Regional Head Election Law reinforces similar principles at the local level, where high-cost politics has historically fueled corruption. This law regulates campaign financing, mandates financial reporting, and prohibits vote-buying practices in regional elections (Buehler & Tan, 2017). Local elections are particularly vulnerable to financial patronage due to close ties between candidates,

local elites, and business actors. By regulating campaign finance at the regional level, the law addresses a key source of post-election corruption, including budget manipulation, rent-seeking, and illicit levies. Financial controls are intended to reduce candidates' dependence on local financiers who expect preferential treatment once power is secured (Kloos & Berenschot, 2016).

Beyond electoral regulations, the Anti-Corruption Law provides a repressive legal framework targeting the consequences of political patronage. It criminalizes bribery, gratification, abuse of office, and corrupt practices in procurement, budgeting, and licensing (Hutchcroft & Rodan, 2016). These offenses frequently arise from patron client relationships formed during party financing and electoral campaigns. The Anti-Corruption Law acts as a legal barrier against the misuse of public office to repay political sponsors (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2020). It targets the downstream effects of corrupt financing by holding public officials criminally responsible for illicit exchanges. However, while effective in punishment, it addresses corruption after it occurs rather than preventing its structural causes (Hicken & Kuhonta, 2015).

Party cadre recruitment represents a critical arena where patronage often operates. Although internal party processes are not regulated in detail, the Political Party Law requires parties to adopt democratic statutes and bylaws governing recruitment, education, and leadership selection. These provisions aim to prevent elite capture and ensure open competition within party structures (Hicken, 2015). Financial transparency plays an indirect but crucial role in shaping internal democracy. When funding sources are opaque, party elites gain disproportionate power to control candidate selection. Conversely, transparent financing reduces the leverage of financial patrons over recruitment decisions and strengthens internal accountability (Pepinsky, 2016).

The positive legal framework also legitimizes public demands for clean party governance. Even without detailed enforcement mechanisms, existing laws provide a normative basis for civil society, party members, and oversight institutions to challenge corrupt practices and demand reform. Despite this comprehensive normative structure, a significant gap persists between legal ideals and political reality (Fossati, 2019). Financial dominance by wealthy patrons remains widespread, with informal donations and opaque transactions continuing to shape party behavior. Financial reports are often inaccessible or incomplete, and internal enforcement remains weak (Mietzner, 2020). Money politics remains pervasive in elections, frequently normalized as a routine practice rather than treated as a serious offense. Enforcement is hindered by evidentiary difficulties, limited oversight capacity, and political interference. As a result, legal prohibitions fail to translate into effective deterrence (Slater, 2013).

Internal party democracy also remains fragile. Candidate selection is often influenced by political dowries, while cadre training functions as a formality overshadowed by financial considerations. Party leadership structures are frequently controlled by narrow elites or political dynasties. Corruption linked to party financing has become structural (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2019). Public officials often engage in corrupt practices to recover campaign costs or reward political backers. While anti-corruption laws enable prosecution, they do not dismantle the financial systems that generate corrupt incentives. This persistent gap reflects the inability of positive law to transform entrenched political culture and economic incentives (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). Patronage networks often provide benefits to party elites, reducing their motivation to pursue reform. Weak enforcement and insufficient public funding further reinforce dependence on private donors.

Structural economic factors also play a role. State subsidies for political parties remain inadequate, while campaign costs continue to rise (Warburton, 2016). Candidates are pushed toward informal and high-risk funding sources, perpetuating cycles of corruption and patronage. Analysis of normative ideals and empirical realities demonstrates that party finance reform is central to narrowing this gap. Without a healthier financial foundation, legal norms remain symbolic and disconnected from practice. Financial reform addresses the root incentives that shape political behavior (Kenawas, 2020).

Reform of political party financing has therefore emerged as a core strategy for corruption prevention and democratic strengthening. It addresses long-standing problems of opacity, elite capture, and informal funding that undermine political accountability (Tapsell, 2020). Strengthening accountability is the first pillar of reform. Accountability must go beyond administrative compliance to ensure that all financial transactions are legally and ethically defensible. Regular reporting, verifiable accounting standards, independent audits, and public disclosure are essential elements of this framework (Kuhonta, 2019).

A robust system of accountability reduces opportunities for illicit contributions, political dowries, and misuse of party funds. Transparent finances also protect party cadres from financial dependency on sponsors when competing in elections.

Public funding represents a second pillar of reform. High political costs combined with limited state assistance create incentives for corrupt financing. Expanding public funding for political parties can support education, cadre development, policy research, and basic operations without reliance on oligarchic donors.

Comparative experiences from established democracies demonstrate that adequate public funding strengthens party integrity and reduces corruption risks. When subsidies are linked to democratic performance and transparency, they encourage healthy competition and institutional development. Digital transparency constitutes a third pillar. Manual reporting systems are vulnerable to manipulation, while digital platforms enable real-time disclosure, donor verification, and permanent transaction records.

Public access to financial data enhances oversight and discourages illicit behavior. The use of non-cash transactions, electronic receipts, and public dashboards reduces opportunities for hidden exchanges. Digital systems also create lasting audit trails that strengthen enforcement capacity. Independent oversight forms the fourth pillar of reform. Regulatory bodies must possess authority, access to financial data, and institutional independence to conduct meaningful supervision. Without credible oversight, even the best-designed rules lose effectiveness. Effective supervision fosters a culture of compliance rather than fear-based enforcement. When parties internalize transparency as a routine expectation, integrity becomes embedded within organizational practice. Internal party reform complements external regulation. Professional internal audits, conflict-of-interest rules, democratic recruitment procedures, and member participation reduce elite domination and enhance legitimacy.

Ultimately, reforming political party financing is a structural solution to corruption and patronage. By addressing financial incentives, it reshapes political behavior at its source. Clean financing supports merit-based recruitment, independent policymaking, and public trust. When party funding becomes transparent, accountable, and sufficient, political parties can reclaim their role as credible pillars of democracy. Electoral competition shifts from transactional exchanges to programmatic debate, strengthening democratic quality and institutional resilience.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia has developed a relatively advanced normative legal framework to prevent money politics, political corruption, and patronage, its practical effectiveness remains limited due to weak enforcement, low transparency, and deeply rooted patronage culture. Political party finance reform therefore emerges as a decisive structural strategy to bridge the gap between legal ideals and political realities by establishing a healthier and more accountable financial foundation. Strengthening accountability, expanding public funding, implementing digital transparency, and ensuring independent oversight enable political parties to reduce dependence on oligarchic donors and dismantle patron client relations. Clean and transparent party financing supports merit-based cadre recruitment, limits sponsor-driven policy influence, and enhances democratic integrity, positioning political parties as credible and professional pillars of democracy.

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