

Participatory Oversight to Safeguard Civil Servants' Neutrality in Local Elections: The Case of Pekalongan Regency

Achmad Irwan Hamzani

Faculty of Law, Universitas Pekalongan

Email: al_hamzani@unikal.ac.id

Abstract

The neutrality of civil servants is a prerequisite for the integrity of local elections, yet field evidence indicates persistent risks of bureaucratic politicization and non-compliance with neutrality regulations. This study analyzes the implementation of participatory oversight aimed at preserving civil servants' neutrality during the 2024 regional election in Pekalongan Regency, and identifies the key challenges, opportunities, and factors that influence its effectiveness. The principal activity examined is a "Participatory Oversight Socialization" convened by the Regional Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu) of Pekalongan, which engaged heads of local government offices, subdistrict heads (camat), and other stakeholders as preventive actors. Findings indicate that participatory oversight characterized by public involvement, the utilization of digital tools (e.g., reporting applications), and cross-sector collaboration expands monitoring coverage and improves early detection of potential neutrality breaches. Despite constraints such as uneven political literacy, unequal access to technology, and coordination gaps, the study finds substantial scope to strengthen oversight through capacity building and the optimization of digital monitoring networks. This community-engaged intervention contributes to theoretical and practical understandings of participatory oversight mechanisms and offers policy recommendations for Bawaslu and regional governments to build a more effective, collaborative, and sustainable oversight ecosystem that upholds electoral integrity.

Keywords: Participatory Oversight; Civil Servant Neutrality; Pilkada; Bawaslu; Public Sector Collaboration

Abstrak

Netralitas Pegawai Negeri Sipil merupakan prasyarat penting bagi integritas penyelenggaraan Pilkada, namun praktik di lapangan menunjukkan masih adanya potensi politisasi birokrasi dan ketidakpatuhan terhadap regulasi netralitas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis implementasi pengawasan partisipatif dalam menjaga netralitas Pegawai Negeri Sipil pada Pilkada Kabupaten Pekalongan serta mengidentifikasi tantangan, peluang, dan faktor yang memengaruhi efektivitasnya. Kegiatan utama yang dikaji adalah "Sosialisasi Pengawasan Partisipatif" yang diselenggarakan oleh Bawaslu Kabupaten Pekalongan dengan melibatkan kepala dinas, camat, dan pemangku kepentingan lainnya sebagai bagian dari upaya pencegahan pelanggaran. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa pengawasan partisipatif melalui pelibatan masyarakat, pemanfaatan teknologi, dan penguatan kolaborasi lintas-sektor mampu memperluas cakupan pengawasan dan meningkatkan deteksi dini terhadap potensi ketidaknetralan aparatur

sipil negara. Meskipun terdapat kendala seperti literasi politik yang belum merata, keterbatasan akses teknologi, dan tantangan koordinasi, peluang penguatan pengawasan partisipatif tetap besar melalui peningkatan kapasitas publik dan optimalisasi jaringan pengawasan digital. Kegiatan pengabdian ini berkontribusi pada penguatan pemahaman mengenai mekanisme pengawasan partisipatif dan memberikan rekomendasi strategis bagi Bawaslu dan pemerintah daerah dalam membangun ekosistem pengawasan yang lebih efektif, kolaboratif, dan berkelanjutan untuk menjaga integritas Pilkada.

Kata Kunci: *Pengawasan Partisipatif; Netralitas ASN; Pilkada; Bawaslu; Kolaborasi Publik.*

Introduction

The neutrality of civil servants (PNS) constitutes a fundamental pillar in safeguarding the integrity of local elections, including those held in Pekalongan Regency. Involvement of civil servants in practical political activities can undermine the objectivity of public services and erode public trust in the bureaucracy (Nugraha et al., 2019; Rahmadani et al., 2024). Within the context of local governance, neutrality is not merely a legal obligation but a crucial determinant of whether electoral processes proceed fairly and remain free from political distortion. Accordingly, a firm commitment to neutrality is indispensable for maintaining the legitimacy of local democratic processes.

Although the principle of neutrality is explicitly mandated in the Civil Service Law and Government Regulation No. 94/2021 on Civil Service Discipline, its implementation in practice continues to face numerous challenges. Structural pressures from local political actors, personal relations, and career-related vulnerabilities often encourage civil servants to become involved in partisan activities (Syaefudin et al., 2023). These conditions demonstrate that neutrality cannot be preserved solely through regulations; it requires robust oversight mechanisms and consistent enforcement of sanctions to ensure compliance throughout the electoral cycle.

In response to these challenges, an institutional mechanism capable of consistently enforcing neutrality is essential. The Election Supervisory Body (Bawaslu) plays a strategic role in this regard, serving as the primary authority responsible for prevention, monitoring, and adjudication of electoral violations. Through voter education, public outreach, and awareness-building initiatives on the importance of civil service independence, Bawaslu contributes to the creation of a more transparent and accountable electoral environment (Marthinus et al., 2024; Pahrina et al., 2024). Collaboration between election supervisors and the broader public further strengthens efforts to ensure civil servant neutrality as a prerequisite for democratic local elections.

Bureaucratic politicization remains a significant challenge in the administration of local elections, as civil servants often occupy vulnerable positions subject to informal directives or structural pressures from influential political actors (Riyanto et al., 2023; Permana et al., 2022; Pattiruhu & Singkery,

2024). These pressures can lead civil servants to adopt partisan behavior that undermines professional standards and the impartial delivery of public services. Such conditions not only give rise to legal violations but also diminish electoral legitimacy and weaken local governance performance (Syaefudin et al., 2023; Regif & Pattipeilohy, 2023). Consequently, strengthening oversight systems becomes an urgent necessity to ensure that local democratic processes proceed fairly and remain insulated from political interference.

Alongside these challenges, the growing public awareness and rapid advancement of information technology have positioned participatory oversight as an essential instrument in safeguarding civil servant neutrality. Through social media and digital reporting platforms, citizens are able to monitor electoral processes in real time and submit reports more quickly and transparently (Wibawa, 2019). This horizontal oversight model not only reduces opportunities for misconduct but also enhances the accountability of electoral management bodies and supports the application of good governance principles at the local level (Nugraha et al., 2023). As such, participatory oversight expands social control mechanisms that are increasingly relevant in the digital era of democratic practice.

The transition toward public-based oversight has also fostered broader collaboration between Bawaslu, communities, media organizations, and educational institutions in monitoring civil servant neutrality. Public participation as co-supervisors strengthens preventive efforts against violations and reinforces collective awareness of the importance of bureaucratic professionalism during elections (Hadiati et al., 2022). This multisectoral collaboration creates more effective oversight structures, as various societal groups possess the capacity to independently access information and report potential violations. Accordingly, electoral oversight evolves beyond vertical institutional mechanisms and emerges as a systematic and participatory social practice.

In response to these dynamics, Bawaslu of Pekalongan Regency organized a “Participatory Oversight Socialization” event under the theme *‘Let’s Safeguard Neutrality in the 2024 Concurrent Elections’*. This activity aimed to strengthen the understanding and engagement of key stakeholders—such as agency heads, subdistrict leaders, and other local actors—in upholding civil servant neutrality during the regional elections. Through an educational and dialogic approach, the program serves as an initial step in building a collaborative oversight ecosystem, which lays the groundwork for the subsequent discussion on the forms, implementation, and effectiveness of participatory oversight in Pekalongan Regency.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of civil service neutrality constitutes a fundamental normative basis for ensuring the integrity of electoral and local governance processes. Civil servants are legally required to refrain from involvement in practical political

activities, particularly during regional elections, to guarantee impartial, professional, and equitable public service delivery. This obligation is codified in the Civil Service Law (Law No. 5/2014) and further reinforced in Government Regulation No. 94/2021 on civil service discipline, which outlines sanctions for violations (Nugraha et al., 2019; Syaefudin et al., 2023). Prior studies emphasize that civil service neutrality is essential not only for sustaining public trust in governmental institutions but also for ensuring that electoral outcomes are free from political bias and coercive influence.

The theory of public participation highlights the importance of citizen engagement as a core element of a healthy democratic system. Public participation extends beyond voting to include active monitoring, evaluation, and involvement in ensuring accountability throughout the electoral process (Syafi'i et al., 2023). In the context of safeguarding civil servant neutrality, public involvement functions as a social control mechanism capable of discouraging partisan behavior and strengthening transparency. As such, active civic engagement plays a strategic role in promoting fair and credible elections by encouraging institutions and bureaucratic actors to adhere to democratic norms (Primadi et al., 2019).

Oversight theory and the framework of collaborative governance underscore the importance of synergistic relationships among official supervisory bodies, civil society, the media, and other stakeholders in maintaining electoral integrity. In this perspective, election oversight is not solely the responsibility of Bawaslu but is broadened through partnerships with community organizations, academic institutions, and digital networks, resulting in a more comprehensive monitoring system (Wibawa, 2019). Collaborative governance enables more responsive and participatory mechanisms for identifying and addressing potential breaches of civil service neutrality. The presence of digital communication technologies further enhances this oversight model by facilitating transparent, accessible, and rapid reporting channels (Cahyaningsih et al., 2022; Rambe et al., 2022).

These theoretical perspectives collectively provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing participatory oversight in the context of civil servant neutrality. The normative framework of neutrality establishes clear behavioral boundaries for civil servants; public participation theory underscores the role of citizens in monitoring compliance; and collaborative governance theory explains how institutional partnerships and societal involvement can produce a more effective oversight structure. Positioned together, these concepts support the argument that maintaining neutrality requires not only legal regulation but also shared responsibility among state institutions and the public. This synthesis serves as the analytical basis for examining the implementation and outcomes of participatory oversight in Pekalongan Regency.

Forms of Participatory Oversight Activities

The participatory oversight activity examined in this study is the "*Participatory Oversight Socialization*" held by the Election Supervisory Body

(Bawaslu) of Pekalongan Regency on 26 September 2024 at Ratu Ball Coffee & Eatery in Kulu Village, Karanganyar District. The event gathered key local stakeholders including heads of regional government offices, subdistrict leaders, and other relevant actors who occupy strategic positions in ensuring civil servant neutrality during the electoral process. The session featured two main speakers: Yulian Akbar, the Regional Secretary of Pekalongan Regency, and the author representing the academic community. The materials were delivered through lectures and interactive dialogue to strengthen participants' understanding of the principles and legal mandates governing ASN neutrality.

The substance of the socialization emphasized the importance of public participation and cross-sector collaboration in monitoring civil servant conduct during regional elections. Through a participatory approach, Bawaslu sought to broaden the reach of oversight by engaging local government officials as strategic partners in preventing violations. The activity also served as a platform for harmonizing perceptions regarding the legal boundaries, prohibited actions, and ethical responsibilities that civil servants must uphold. Furthermore, the dialogue sessions enabled participants to discuss potential risks, identify early indicators of non-neutral behavior, and explore preventive measures aligned with the regulatory framework.

The effectiveness of the activity can be observed through the participants' improved understanding of neutrality obligations and the absence of significant reports related to civil servant misconduct during the 2024 regional election in Pekalongan Regency. In this sense, the socialization functioned not only as an informational program but also as a preventive intervention that strengthened bureaucratic compliance and fostered a collective awareness of the importance of electoral integrity. The activity thus provides a foundational model for participatory oversight in local elections and offers insights for enhancing institutional-community partnerships in future supervisory initiatives.



Figure 1: Activity photos participatory oversight socialization

Discussion

1. Implementation of Participatory Oversight in Safeguarding Civil Servant Neutrality

The implementation of participatory oversight to safeguard civil servant neutrality in the 2024 local elections in Pekalongan Regency is carried out through direct public involvement and the use of available technological tools. One of the key innovations is the use of the *Gowaslu* application, which enables citizens to report alleged violations—including breaches of ASN neutrality—promptly and in a verifiable manner (Putri et al., 2024). This approach expands oversight channels from a solely vertical model relying on formal institutions to a horizontal model that actively engages the public. Consequently, participatory oversight serves as an early detection mechanism that strengthens Bawaslu's formal efforts to maintain the integrity of the electoral process.

Bawaslu of Pekalongan Regency plays a central role in coordinating participatory oversight through preventive strategies, public education, and the facilitation of community-based reporting mechanisms. Public involvement is strengthened through outreach programs, socialization, and guidance on how to file reports accurately and in accordance with procedural standards (Pahrina et al., 2024). Bawaslu also acts as an intermediary between community reports and follow-up actions by relevant authorities, ensuring that incoming information is addressed in a timely and accountable manner (Suryani et al., 2024). Through this collaborative approach, oversight becomes not only an institutional responsibility but also a shared civic commitment to ensuring civil servant neutrality.

To support these mechanisms, participatory oversight requires broader networks and sustained collaboration to guarantee its effectiveness at the local level. Collaborative patterns involving Bawaslu, communities, media organizations, and educational institutions play a vital role in expanding the scope and quality of neutrality monitoring. Such collaboration allows for faster information dissemination, wider public education, and improved community capacity to identify and report potential violations (Akhsani et al., 2024; Ulya & Huda, 2022). These synergies enable Bawaslu to extend its monitoring reach beyond the limitations of formal personnel, while also reinforcing essential checks and balances to maintain transparency and accountability throughout the electoral process.

Evaluation of participatory oversight forms an essential component in determining how effectively these mechanisms safeguard civil servant neutrality. Through systematic evaluation, Bawaslu can identify oversight gaps, assess levels of compliance among civil servants, and understand patterns of potential violations that may arise throughout the electoral process (Dahlan & Anims, 2024; Nugraha et al., 2023). The findings generated from this evaluative process provide critical input for refining future oversight strategies, including improving report verification procedures and strengthening community reporting capacity. Accordingly, evaluation functions not only as a monitoring tool but also as a

continuous improvement mechanism that ensures greater effectiveness of participatory oversight over time.

The implementation of participatory oversight in Pekalongan Regency demonstrates that the success of safeguarding civil servant neutrality depends not only on regulations and institutional capacity but also on the active involvement of the community and the quality of inter-stakeholder coordination. By integrating technological tools for monitoring, public education initiatives, and systematic evaluation practices, participatory oversight emerges as an effective preventive strategy for reducing violations and reinforcing the integrity of the electoral process. This collaborative approach ultimately strengthens bureaucratic compliance and contributes to the establishment of a culture of accountability within local governance. As a result, participatory oversight has the potential to become a sustainable pillar for maintaining neutrality in future local elections.

2. Challenges, Opportunities, and Effectiveness of Participatory Oversight

Participatory oversight encounters several notable challenges, particularly concerning the sustainability of collaboration among Bawaslu, community members, media organizations, and educational institutions. Although such collaboration has the potential to expand monitoring coverage, not all stakeholders possess equal capacity, political literacy, or commitment to performing effective oversight (Akhsani et al., 2024; Ulya & Huda, 2022). Furthermore, limited public confidence and the perceived risks associated with reporting violations—including breaches of civil servant neutrality—often discourage citizens from coming forward. These challenges highlight the need for strengthened literacy initiatives, technical training, and institutional support to ensure that public participation becomes substantive rather than merely symbolic.

In addition to collaborative limitations, participatory oversight is constrained by issues related to system responsiveness and the technical challenges of handling community reports. Many citizen reports require lengthy verification processes or lack sufficient supporting evidence, thereby slowing the follow-up actions required to address potential violations of civil servant neutrality (Dahlan & Anims, 2024; Nugraha et al., 2023). Moreover, disparities in technological access and skills mean that not all segments of society can effectively utilize digital monitoring tools—such as the *Gowaslu* application—to report incidents in real time. These barriers underscore the urgent need for more adaptive, user-friendly oversight systems supported by adequate technological infrastructure and community training.

Despite the existing challenges, these obstacles simultaneously present opportunities to strengthen participatory oversight through capacity building and digital empowerment. Enhancing political literacy, offering training on digital reporting mechanisms, and improving coordination among involved institutions can significantly widen public engagement and bolster the overall effectiveness of neutrality monitoring. With targeted interventions, communities can evolve from

passive observers into proactive partners capable of contributing meaningfully to the integrity of the electoral process. These opportunities highlight the transformative potential of participatory oversight when supported by coherent strategies and inclusive institutional frameworks.

Advances in digital governance, combined with the rising engagement of younger generations, offer significant opportunities to broaden participatory oversight. Digital transformation allows government and citizens to interact more efficiently, creating avenues for transparent information sharing and more responsive monitoring systems (Kirana & Majid, 2022). This momentum also supports anti-corruption initiatives, enabling communities to take part in preventive efforts that strengthen institutional integrity at the local level. As social and youth communities increasingly adopt digital tools, their involvement can reinforce the cultural and ethical foundations necessary for promoting accountable and corruption-resistant governance.

The effectiveness of participatory oversight can also be observed through its influence on reducing violations and shaping bureaucratic behavior. Research indicates that active public monitoring contributes to greater bureaucratic accountability, limiting opportunities for misconduct and reinforcing compliance with neutrality norms (Maritza & Taufiqurokhman, 2024). Moreover, the presence of civil society oversight exerts moral pressure on civil servants, encouraging them to act professionally and avoid politically biased actions. A responsive government that promptly addresses community reports further strengthens public trust and enhances the credibility of neutrality enforcement mechanisms.

These findings demonstrate that participatory oversight does not merely complement formal supervisory mechanisms but also enhances their overall effectiveness. When citizens actively report violations and institutions respond promptly, a mutually reinforcing cycle emerges in which public confidence and institutional accountability strengthen one another. This synergy contributes to a more transparent electoral environment, ensuring that neutrality principles are upheld and that electoral governance operates within democratic standards. As such, participatory oversight becomes an integral part of a broader democratic ecosystem that relies on shared responsibility between state institutions and the public.

Taken together, the challenges, opportunities, and effectiveness of participatory oversight illustrate its strategic role in safeguarding civil servant neutrality in local elections. While structural, technical, and cultural barriers remain, these can be mitigated through sustained collaboration, digital empowerment, and comprehensive community engagement. By strengthening institutional responsiveness and expanding public participation, participatory oversight in Pekalongan Regency has the potential to evolve into a sustainable model for promoting electoral integrity. This framework underscores the importance of integrating community-based monitoring into formal oversight

systems to achieve long-term improvements in bureaucratic professionalism and democratic governance.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that participatory oversight plays a pivotal role in safeguarding civil servant neutrality during local elections in Pekalongan Regency. The involvement of citizens, supported by digital reporting tools and structured collaboration with Bawaslu, expands the reach of monitoring and strengthens early detection of potential violations. This participatory model reinforces the institutional mechanisms already in place and contributes to building a more transparent, accountable, and integrity-driven electoral environment.

Despite its promise, participatory oversight continues to face several challenges, including uneven political literacy, limited technological accessibility, and coordination gaps among stakeholders. Nevertheless, the opportunities presented by digital transformation, increased civic awareness, and youth engagement indicate substantial potential for improving the effectiveness of community-based monitoring. When these elements are optimized, participatory oversight can exert moral, social, and administrative pressure that significantly bolsters civil servants' compliance with neutrality norms.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, Bawaslu should intensify political literacy initiatives and digital reporting training to strengthen community capacity in detecting and reporting neutrality violations. Second, institutional coordination must be enhanced through regular collaborative forums involving government agencies, civil society organizations, academics, and the media. Third, digital oversight infrastructure should be improved to ensure accessibility and usability across diverse community groups. By implementing these measures, participatory oversight in Pekalongan Regency can evolve into a more effective, collaborative, and sustainable model for protecting civil servant neutrality and promoting electoral integrity in future local elections.

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