

**STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION THROUGH EXPERT
INVOLVEMENT: A COMMUNITY SERVICE ENGAGEMENT AS DEBATE
PANELIST FOR THE 2024 TEGAL CITY MAYORAL ELECTION**

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ABSTRACT

This community service initiative was executed in alignment with the Tri Dharma of Higher Education, emphasizing civic engagement through expert involvement in the second public debate pertaining to the 2024 Tegal City mayoral election. The objective of the program was to enhance democratic participation and promote evidence-based discourse within local governance by engaging scholars as impartial panelists. Utilizing Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), together with consultations and joint drafting methods, the panel crafted twenty significant questions regarding urban development, the digital economy, and creative industries. In addition, this initiative highlights the strategic function of universities as mediating institutions between the state and society, particularly in local electoral contexts where information asymmetry and populist narratives often prevail. By positioning academic experts as neutral facilitators of policy-oriented debate, the program contributed to strengthening deliberative democratic practices and reinforcing public trust in electoral processes. This experience further demonstrates that structured academic engagement in electoral forums can serve not only as a form of community service but also as a scalable model for institutionalizing evidence-based public deliberation within decentralized democratic systems. The conclusions illustrate the vital importance of higher learning institutions in advancing participatory democracy and proficient governance by blending knowledge, civic awareness, and community communication. This venture demonstrates the role that scholarly environments can have in supporting democratic processes and guiding local policy formulation with knowledge.

Keywords: crossing community service; democratic participation; local election; public debate; tegal city

INTRODUCTION

Public debates represent an essential and pivotal element within the intricate framework of democratic electoral processes, functioning as a crucial platform through which candidates are afforded the opportunity to articulate their comprehensive visions for governance, rigorously defend their policy choices, and engage directly and meaningfully with the citizenry in a manner that fosters democratic dialogue and participation (Aalberg & Strömbäck, 2011; McKinney & Carlin, 2020). In the context of Indonesia's decentralized governance structure, local election debates serve as a significant avenue for citizens to critically evaluate the competencies, qualifications, and responsiveness of the candidates standing for election, thereby facilitating an informed electorate capable of making judicious choices (Norris, 2014; Pratikno, 2022). Nevertheless, these debates frequently encounter a myriad of challenges, including but not limited to the prevalence of superficial content that lacks depth, a conspicuous absence of evidence-based discussion that would enhance the quality of discourse, and a limited inclusion of expert perspectives that could provide valuable insights into the issues at hand (Siregar & Wibowo, 2021).

This particular community service project, which was meticulously conducted in collaboration between the Regional Election Commission (KPUD) of Tegal City and the esteemed Politeknik Transportasi Darat Indonesia – STTD, aimed to significantly enhance the overall quality of the debates by actively involving a diverse array of academic experts as panelists, thereby enriching the conversation with scholarly insights and evidence-based arguments. This initiative serves as a compelling example of how higher education institutions, in alignment with the Tri Dharma principles that guide their mission, contribute not only to the realms of education and research but also to the vital processes of civic empowerment and the preservation of democratic integrity within society (Healey, 2022; Susanti, 2023).

METHOD

The community service activity, which was meticulously organized and executed over the span of three days from the 10th to the 12th of November in the year 2024, was carried out under the auspices of an official collaborative partnership between the General Election Commission of Tegal City (KPUD Tegal City) and the Indonesian Institute of Transportation and Development (PTDI-STTD). This initiative adopted a robust participatory qualitative methodology that intricately combined various research techniques, including Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), expert panel meetings, and comprehensive direct observations of the debate proceedings that transpired during the event.



Focus Group Discussion (Committee Documentation, 2024)



FGD with multi stakeholder involvement (Committee Documentation, 2024)

The Focus Group Discussions were thoughtfully designed to involve a diverse array of stakeholders, including local government officials, representatives from the private sector, leaders of civil society organizations, and distinguished academic professionals, all aimed at systematically identifying pressing local issues and formulating pertinent research questions that would drive the inquiry forward. The framework for collecting data was thoroughly planned to conform to the participatory action research (PAR) guidelines, which significantly

prioritize the joint creation of knowledge and the energetic participation of different stakeholders in the research activity (Kemmis et al., 2014). In all discussions and meetings, a firm resolve was evident in maintaining the values of impartiality and clarity, confirming that every task was executed in complete adherence to the national standards outlined for ensuring electoral integrity (KPU RI, 2023)



Formulation of questions for debate by the committee (Committee Documentation, 2024)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The extensive discussions that took place during the deliberative sessions culminated in the identification of three pivotal clusters of issues that warrant scholarly attention and investigation: (1) the pronounced inequality present within urban infrastructure, which affects various demographic groups disproportionately; (2) the critical assessment of readiness for the transformation toward a digital economy, which is increasingly becoming a focus of modern economic discourse; and (3) the imperative need for the development and nurturing of creative economy ecosystems that can foster innovation and entrepreneurship. These overarching themes were meticulously synthesized into a total of twenty substantial debate questions, each carefully crafted to evoke data-driven responses from candidates, thereby ensuring a thorough exploration of the issues at hand.



The Committee before the debate (Committee documentation, 2024)

The feedback gathered from the public indicated a significant consensus regarding the high relevance and neutrality of the debate, which marks a noteworthy and positive shift towards promoting issue-based political discourse in the context of local elections, as documented in the scholarly work of Diamond (2019). The active involvement of academic experts in the

proceedings played a crucial role in elevating the intellectual rigor of the debate, thereby ensuring that the local challenges faced by the community were thoroughly discussed within the broader frameworks of development, as noted in the research conducted by Kuncoro (2020) and the statistical data provided by BPS (2023).



During the debate (Committee documentation, 2024)

Furthermore, the collaborative partnership established between the General Election Commission of the Region (KPUD) and the Indonesian School of Transportation Management (PTDI-STTD) serves as a compelling illustration of the increasing importance of civic-academic partnerships in the enhancement of democratic culture and the improvement of local governance practices, as articulated in the works of Healey (2022) and Kezar & Maxey (2021). Such strategic partnerships not only serve to enhance the overall quality of public deliberation but also play a pivotal role in empowering local communities through the implementation of participatory mechanisms that facilitate knowledge-sharing and engagement, as posited by Gaventa & Barrett (2019). The case study of Tegal serves as a profound example, demonstrating that debates driven by experts can effectively function as instruments of civic education, thereby assisting voters in making informed decisions that are firmly grounded in factual evidence and relevant policy considerations.



The committee and KPUD Tegal Team (Committee documentation, 2024)

From a theoretical perspective, the involvement of academic experts as debate panelists reflects the principles of deliberative democracy, which emphasize reasoned argumentation, inclusivity, and the use of evidence in public decision-making processes (Norris, 2014; Diamond, 2019). The formulation of debate questions grounded in empirical data and policy frameworks reduced the tendency toward rhetorical and personality-based campaigning, a challenge frequently observed in local elections within decentralized political systems. This approach aligns with the argument that democratic quality is significantly enhanced when electoral debates move beyond symbolic contestation and toward substantive policy evaluation.

The findings also suggest that academic participation in electoral debates contributes to strengthening local governance capacity by bridging technical knowledge and public communication. Scholars, acting as neutral intermediaries, translate complex policy issues—such as urban infrastructure inequality, digital economic readiness, and creative industry development—into accessible yet rigorous questions for candidates. This role is consistent with the concept of public scholarship, where academic knowledge is mobilized to address real-world governance challenges while maintaining scholarly integrity (Kezar & Maxey, 2021; Healey, 2022). In the context of Tegal City, this mediation helped align candidate responses with measurable development indicators and regional planning priorities (BPS, 2023; Kuncoro, 2020). Moreover, the expert-driven debate format functioned as an informal civic education mechanism for voters. Exposure to policy-oriented questioning encouraged the electorate to assess candidates based on feasibility, coherence, and alignment with local development needs rather than solely on political identity or charisma. This finding corroborates previous studies indicating that structured public debates can enhance voter literacy and reduce the influence of misinformation in electoral contexts (Aalberg & Strömbäck, 2011; McKinney & Carlin, 2020). Consequently, the debate not only served an electoral function but also contributed to long-term democratic capacity-building at the local level.

The Tegal City experience further demonstrates the replicability of civic–academic collaboration as a governance innovation within Indonesia’s decentralized democracy. Given the uniform regulatory framework governing local elections (KPU RI, 2023), this model can be adapted by other regions with contextual modifications. Institutionalizing academic involvement in public debates may strengthen electoral integrity while simultaneously fulfilling the Tri Dharma mandate of higher education institutions. As argued by Gaventa and Barrett (2019), such participatory mechanisms are most effective when they are embedded within formal governance structures rather than treated as ad hoc interventions.

CONCLUSION

This particular community service initiative serves as a compelling illustration of how institutions of higher education possess the potential to function as significant catalysts that promote democratic participation while simultaneously enhancing the mechanisms of governance. Through the active involvement of experts in public discussions, the academic knowledge that was generated has been effectively translated into a form of civic discourse that is accessible to the general populace, which in turn has led to an improvement in both the integrity and inclusiveness of local electoral processes. The model exemplified by the Tegal initiative strongly emphasizes that when academic engagement is strategically structured in a collaborative manner alongside electoral bodies and authorities, it has the capacity to significantly bolster the principles of transparency and accountability, as well as the

formulation of evidence-based policymaking practices. It is highly advisable that future implementations and replications of this successful model be pursued in various other regions, as this would further institutionalize the collaboration between civic entities and academic institutions within the broader democratic ecosystem of Indonesia

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