

Grassroots Digital Campaigning in Indonesia: Volunteer Networks, Political Communication, and Electoral Mobilization

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Abstract

Political volunteers have become increasingly important actors in Indonesian electoral campaigns, particularly through decentralized digital networks. Unlike formal party structures, volunteer organizations can rapidly mobilize supporters through social media, messaging applications, and community networks. This article examines grassroots digital campaigning in Indonesia and its implications for democratic participation. Using qualitative social movement and political communication analysis, the study investigates volunteer networks, campaign narratives, digital coordination, and voter engagement. The article argues that volunteer networks can expand political participation by allowing citizens to become active political communicators rather than passive recipients of campaign messages. However, decentralized structures may also create accountability problems when volunteers distribute misleading information or engage in aggressive political attacks without formal responsibility. The study proposes a democratic volunteerism framework emphasizing transparency, political literacy, ethical communication, and accountability. The article concludes that grassroots digital campaigning has become an important component of Indonesian electoral politics and demonstrates the increasing importance of citizen-led political communication.

[Relawan politik telah menjadi aktor yang semakin penting dalam kampanye pemilu di Indonesia, khususnya melalui jaringan digital yang terdesentralisasi. Tidak seperti struktur partai formal, organisasi relawan dapat dengan cepat memobilisasi pendukung melalui media sosial, aplikasi pesan, dan jaringan komunitas. Artikel ini mengkaji kampanye digital akar rumput di Indonesia dan implikasinya terhadap partisipasi demokratis. Dengan menggunakan analisis gerakan sosial kualitatif dan komunikasi politik, studi ini meneliti jaringan relawan, narasi kampanye, koordinasi digital, dan keterlibatan pemilih. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa jaringan relawan dapat memperluas partisipasi politik dengan memungkinkan warga negara untuk menjadi

komunikator politik aktif daripada penerima pasif pesan kampanye. Namun, struktur yang terdesentralisasi juga dapat menciptakan masalah akuntabilitas ketika relawan menyebarkan informasi yang menyesatkan atau terlibat dalam serangan politik agresif tanpa tanggung jawab formal. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja relawan demokratis yang menekankan transparansi, literasi politik, komunikasi etis, dan akuntabilitas. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa kampanye digital akar rumput telah menjadi komponen penting dari politik pemilu Indonesia dan menunjukkan semakin pentingnya komunikasi politik yang dipimpin warga negara.]

Keywords: Political volunteers, digital campaigning, electoral mobilization, political communication, Indonesia

Introduction

Political volunteers have become a distinctive feature of Indonesian electoral politics, particularly since the presidential elections of 2014 and 2019. Unlike conventional party cadres, volunteers often emerge from civic communities, professional networks, neighborhood organizations, youth groups, or informal associations that mobilize support around particular candidates. Their emergence has been interpreted as an expression of expanding citizen participation beyond the boundaries of formal party institutions. Arianto argues that the rise of political volunteers represented a form of active citizenship capable of contributing to an extra-parliamentary model of democratic participation (Arianto 2014). Subsequent research indicates that volunteer networks continued to develop after electoral contests, although their political orientations differed between groups that remained socially active and those that became passive observers of government performance (Arianto 2016). These developments suggest that volunteerism cannot be reduced to campaign labor because it may also become a mechanism through which citizens negotiate their relationship with political power.

The growth of digital media has altered the organizational environment in which these volunteers operate. Social media, messaging applications, and other digital platforms enable supporters to communicate without relying entirely on formal campaign headquarters. Information can move rapidly from national coordinators to local communities and from local volunteers back to campaign organizers. Research on volunteer communication during the Jokowi–Jusuf Kalla campaign demonstrates that digital media became an important channel for distributing political messages, particularly through Twitter and Instagram (Senova 2016). More recent research concerning local elections similarly shows that volunteers can combine digital communication with direct community engagement, thereby creating communication structures that operate simultaneously through formal and informal channels (Dermawan et al. 2024). The

result is a campaign environment in which organizational authority is increasingly distributed across networks.

This transformation raises an important democratic question. If citizens can organize themselves politically through digital networks, does this necessarily strengthen democratic participation? The answer cannot be assumed. Digital volunteer networks can broaden political participation because individuals are able to produce, circulate, and interpret political messages independently of formal party organizations. At the same time, decentralized communication makes it difficult to determine who is responsible for particular campaign messages. A volunteer may distribute misleading information without formal authorization, while campaign organizations may benefit politically from the message without accepting responsibility for it. Research concerning political volunteers in Indonesia has identified the tension between volunteer autonomy and institutional accountability, particularly where volunteer organizations operate outside conventional party structures (Syauket 2022; Rinaldi, Ridho, and Ginting 2024).

The development of digital campaigning also changes the meaning of electoral mobilization. Traditional campaigns generally distinguish between political elites who produce messages and voters who receive them. Digital networks complicate this distinction because supporters can simultaneously become content producers, campaign intermediaries, opinion leaders, and mobilizers. Political messages may be reformulated by volunteers according to local cultural contexts and distributed through personal networks rather than official campaign accounts. Research on digital campaigns before the 2024 election indicates that social media enabled political actors to communicate with different voter groups through platform-specific strategies and personalized content (Fahrudi and Fahrudin 2023). The political significance of volunteers therefore lies partly in their ability to connect campaign narratives with everyday social relationships.

Previous studies have provided important empirical insights but have generally examined separate elements of the phenomenon. Research on volunteers has focused on their emergence, organizational position, and relationship with political institutions (Arianto 2014; Putra, Hertanto, and Warganegara 2022). Research on digital campaigning has concentrated on social-media strategies, candidate branding, and voter participation (Hasfi 2019; Afrita 2024). Other studies have examined digital activism and online mobilization as broader forms of political participation (Ayudha 2022; Alamsyah and Ridwan 2023). The literature therefore provides substantial evidence about individual components of grassroots campaigning, but less attention has been given to how volunteer networks transform digital communication into electoral mobilization while simultaneously creating new accountability problems.

This article addresses that gap by examining grassroots digital campaigning as a networked political process rather than as a collection of social-media techniques. The article asks how volunteer networks are formed, how campaign communication circulates through those networks, and how digital participation is

converted into electoral action. It argues that volunteers perform a bridging function between formal campaign organizations and citizens. They translate campaign narratives into interpersonal communication, extend messages into community networks, and create opportunities for citizens to participate in political communication. Yet the same decentralized structure that makes volunteer networks flexible can also weaken responsibility for information quality and political conduct.

The article contributes to the literature by proposing the concept of democratic volunteerism. Democratic volunteerism refers to citizen-led electoral participation in which political autonomy is combined with political literacy, communicative responsibility, transparency, and accountability. The concept differs from a purely organizational understanding of volunteers because it treats them as political communicators whose activities have consequences for democratic information environments. A volunteer network should therefore be evaluated not only according to its ability to mobilize votes but also according to whether it expands meaningful political participation without undermining informed public deliberation.

Methodologically, the study uses qualitative analytical synthesis of empirical articles published in Indonesian academic journals. The literature was selected because it addresses political volunteers, electoral communication, digital campaigning, social-media political communication, digital activism, and political participation in Indonesia. Sources published in 2026 were excluded in accordance with the research requirement. The analysis compares findings across presidential elections, local elections, political-party campaigns, volunteer movements, and digital activism. Rather than treating every case as identical, the analysis identifies recurring mechanisms that explain how grassroots digital campaigning functions within Indonesia's hybrid electoral environment.

Volunteer Networks as an Alternative Electoral Infrastructure

Political volunteerism emerged partly from dissatisfaction with the limitations of formal party organizations. Political parties traditionally perform recruitment, political education, candidate promotion, and electoral mobilization. However, Indonesian electoral politics has also demonstrated the capacity of citizens to organize independently around particular candidates or political agendas. Arianto's analysis of the 2014 presidential contest shows that political volunteers represented an important form of active citizen participation and challenged the assumption that electoral mobilization must be mediated exclusively by parties (Arianto 2014). The emergence of volunteer networks therefore reflects a broader transformation in political organization. Citizens can construct temporary or semi-permanent political structures without becoming members of a political party. Digital communication subsequently provides these structures with affordable tools for coordination and public communication.

The organizational flexibility of volunteer networks distinguishes them from conventional campaign machinery. Formal campaign organizations normally have defined leadership structures, official responsibilities, and relatively clear lines of command. Volunteer networks may instead operate through loose associations in which participants join because of personal commitment, ideological affinity, friendship, professional relationships, or community identity. Research concerning volunteers in the 2019 presidential election demonstrates that volunteer organizations occupied a distinct position within electoral politics and could operate alongside formal political institutions (Rinaldi, Ridho, and Ginting 2024). This organizational ambiguity can be an advantage because volunteers can respond rapidly to political developments without waiting for formal authorization. It can also become a weakness when coordination is necessary or when political responsibility must be established.

Digital platforms strengthen this flexible organizational model because communication does not require a permanent physical headquarters. A volunteer coordinator can distribute information through a messaging group, while regional supporters can adapt that information to local circumstances. The result resembles a network rather than a hierarchy. The structure is particularly useful during electoral campaigns because political information must move rapidly across geographically dispersed constituencies. Research concerning volunteer communication in local elections demonstrates that volunteers can combine internal organizational communication with public-facing communication through social media and community networks (Dermawan et al. 2024). The volunteer organization thus becomes an intermediary structure connecting campaign leadership with voters.

The network character of volunteer organizations also changes recruitment. In conventional political organizations, recruitment often requires formal membership or ideological affiliation. Digital volunteerism allows participation to begin with relatively low levels of commitment. Individuals may first follow a candidate, share campaign content, participate in an online discussion, join a messaging group, and eventually become active volunteers. This process creates a continuum between audience and activist. Research on digital political communication indicates that social media has reduced the distance between political communicators and citizens, making political interaction more immediate and participatory (Hasfi 2019). Volunteer networks benefit from this transformation because they can continuously convert audiences into participants.

Personal relationships are particularly important in this process. Political messages distributed by friends, colleagues, relatives, or community leaders may be perceived differently from messages appearing on official campaign accounts. Volunteers therefore function as interpersonal interpreters of campaign communication. Their credibility may derive less from formal political authority than from social proximity. Senova's study of volunteer communication demonstrates how media literacy and the ability to manage political information

became important components of volunteer campaigning (Senova 2016). This finding suggests that volunteers do not merely reproduce official messages. They actively determine which messages should be communicated, through which channels, and to which audiences.

The local dimension of volunteer networks further increases their electoral relevance. National campaign narratives often require adaptation before they can become meaningful in specific communities. Issues such as employment, infrastructure, religious identity, local leadership, or public services may be interpreted differently across regions. Volunteers who possess local knowledge can translate national campaign messages into locally recognizable arguments. Evidence from local electoral campaigning indicates that volunteers frequently complement formal campaign communication through direct community interaction and grassroots outreach (Dermawan et al. 2024). This bridging role makes volunteer networks particularly valuable in elections where political trust is strongly influenced by interpersonal relationships.

Volunteer networks can also survive beyond a single electoral event. Arianto's analysis of the post-2014 period found that volunteer groups did not disappear uniformly after the election; some continued to engage with government and political issues, while others became relatively passive (Arianto 2016). This finding challenges the idea that volunteerism is simply temporary electoral labor. Some networks may evolve into civic organizations, advocacy groups, or informal political monitoring structures. Their post-election trajectory depends partly on whether volunteers understand their political role as merely supporting a candidate or as participating in public affairs more broadly.

Nevertheless, continuity after elections can create political dilemmas. Volunteers who supported a successful candidate may expect access, recognition, or influence after the election. This creates the possibility that volunteerism can shift from participatory citizenship toward patronage. Research concerning political volunteers and clientelism in Lampung identifies the possibility that volunteer organizations may become involved in relationships characterized by exchange and political dependence (Putra, Hertanto, and Warganegara 2022). The existence of volunteers therefore does not automatically indicate democratic renewal. Their democratic contribution depends on whether participation remains oriented toward public interests rather than private political rewards.

The problem of institutional boundaries becomes more complicated when volunteer groups become closely associated with parties or candidates. Political volunteers may claim autonomy while simultaneously receiving logistical support, communication materials, or strategic guidance from formal campaign organizations. Research on the disruption of party institutions by political volunteers demonstrates that volunteer networks can complicate traditional party structures because they may operate independently while still contributing directly to electoral success (Arifki 2021). This creates a hybrid organizational environment

in which formal and informal actors cooperate without necessarily sharing the same institutional responsibilities.

Such arrangements can be democratically productive when volunteers broaden access to political participation. Citizens who would otherwise have limited opportunities to engage in electoral politics can become active communicators and organizers. However, participation becomes problematic when autonomy is used to avoid accountability. A volunteer organization cannot legitimately claim that it is entirely independent when it strategically serves a candidate, while simultaneously avoiding responsibility for campaign practices. Democratic volunteerism therefore requires transparency concerning organizational relationships, sources of logistical support, and the boundaries between independent citizen activity and coordinated campaign activity.

Digital networks further complicate accountability because a single political message can move through multiple layers of redistribution. A message created by a campaign team may be modified by a volunteer, shared by another supporter, and transformed again by a community account. By the time it reaches a large audience, identifying its original source may be difficult. This problem is particularly serious when campaign communication contains factual claims about opponents. Research on Indonesian digital campaigns has documented the prevalence of antagonistic narratives, misinformation, and provocative content in electoral social-media environments (Gusfa and Kadjuand 2020). The decentralized structure of volunteer networks can accelerate such circulation.

The most important implication is that volunteer networks should be understood as an electoral infrastructure in their own right. They are not simply auxiliary actors attached to formal campaigns. They provide recruitment, interpersonal communication, message translation, community outreach, and digital amplification. Their importance derives precisely from the fact that they occupy an intermediate position between campaign institutions and citizens. This position can expand democratic participation, but it also requires clear norms of political responsibility. The legitimacy of grassroots campaigning ultimately depends on whether network flexibility is accompanied by mechanisms capable of maintaining ethical political communication.

Digital Communication as a Mechanism of Electoral Mobilization

The transformation of volunteer organization becomes most visible in the way political messages circulate. Digital communication allows campaign information to move rapidly between central campaign actors, volunteer coordinators, and individual supporters. Unlike traditional campaign communication, where messages tend to move from candidates toward mass audiences, digital networks allow supporters to redistribute and reinterpret messages. This creates a participatory communication environment in which campaign messages can acquire new meanings through interaction. Hasfi argues that digital communication

has transformed political communication by changing the relationship between political actors, media, and citizens (Hasfi 2019). Volunteer networks benefit directly from this transformation because their political effectiveness depends upon the capacity to circulate messages through personal and digital connections.

Social media platforms also enable campaign communication to become more continuous. Traditional campaigns often concentrate political communication during scheduled rallies, debates, advertisements, and public appearances. Digital platforms allow volunteers to communicate throughout the day and respond rapidly to political developments. Research concerning Indonesian political campaigns before the 2024 election shows that political parties and candidates increasingly used multiple platforms to maintain continuous communication with potential voters (Fahruji and Fahrudin 2023). Volunteers extend this continuity by distributing messages through personal accounts and community groups. Electoral campaigning consequently becomes a permanent stream of communication rather than a series of isolated campaign events.

The effectiveness of digital communication depends heavily on the ability to adapt messages to specific audiences. Different platforms encourage different forms of communication, while different demographic groups may respond to different political narratives. Research on digital campaign strategies demonstrates that political actors increasingly adjust content to the characteristics of particular platforms and audiences (Yahya, Febrianti, and Rasyad 2023). Volunteer networks can intensify this process because volunteers often possess knowledge about the preferences and concerns of their own communities. The campaign message therefore becomes more flexible as it travels through the network.

Instagram, for example, encourages political communication based on visual presentation, personal branding, short narratives, and symbolic identity. Research concerning political communication through Instagram demonstrates that candidate image construction can influence audience perception, although such influence is not necessarily direct or deterministic (Dhara et al. 2020). Volunteers can strengthen this communication by reproducing candidate images through their own networks. The candidate's political identity therefore becomes distributed across numerous accounts rather than remaining concentrated on an official campaign profile.

This distribution can increase political visibility but can also blur the distinction between official and unofficial campaign messages. A volunteer may create content that resembles an official campaign statement even though it has never been approved by the campaign organization. The content may nevertheless be interpreted by audiences as representative of the candidate. Such ambiguity is particularly important when volunteers engage in attacks against opponents. Research concerning digital electoral campaigns has demonstrated that misinformation, antagonistic narratives, and identity-based provocation can circulate through online networks and contribute to political polarization (Gusfa

and Kadjuand 2020). Volunteer communication therefore requires greater attention to source attribution and message verification.

Messaging applications add another layer to this process because they combine digital communication with existing interpersonal networks. A political message distributed through a family, neighborhood, professional, or community group may appear less like advertising and more like ordinary interpersonal communication. This can increase trust and attention. Volunteer networks are particularly effective in such environments because they are embedded within social relationships. The campaign is no longer presented only as an institutional political message but as a recommendation or interpretation offered by someone known to the recipient.

The use of personal networks can also facilitate two-way communication. Volunteers can receive questions from voters, identify local concerns, and communicate those concerns back to campaign organizations. This makes volunteers potentially valuable sources of political feedback. Research on local campaigns demonstrates that formal campaign communication and volunteer-based communication can operate in complementary ways, with volunteers providing interpersonal contact that formal channels cannot easily reproduce (Dermawan et al. 2024). The volunteer therefore becomes both communicator and information collector.

This reciprocal function changes the meaning of electoral mobilization. Mobilization is not simply the process of persuading voters to support a candidate. It involves constructing relationships through which citizens feel recognized, informed, and capable of political participation. Digital platforms can facilitate this process by enabling volunteers to answer questions, organize activities, and encourage supporters to participate in offline events. Research on digital political activism indicates that online participation can function as a gateway to broader forms of political engagement when digital communication is connected to concrete collective action (Alamsyah and Ridwan 2023).

The connection between online and offline mobilization is particularly important because electoral politics remains strongly dependent on physical social networks. Campaign rallies, neighborhood meetings, door-to-door communication, community events, and polling-day coordination continue to matter. Digital platforms do not eliminate these activities; instead, they help coordinate them. Research on volunteer networks indicates that online communication can support offline mobilization by distributing information about campaign events and coordinating participants (Arianto 2016). The most effective volunteer structures are therefore hybrid rather than exclusively digital.

The political effects of such mobilization can be substantial among younger voters. Digital platforms provide young citizens with information about candidates and political issues while enabling them to participate through sharing, commenting, producing content, or discussing political issues with peers. Research concerning Generation Z and political communication in Indonesia emphasizes

that digital media have become important sources of political information and interaction for younger citizens (Sulaiman, Fauzi, and Viviani 2024). Volunteer networks can use this environment to transform young citizens from campaign audiences into active participants in political communication.

However, high digital engagement should not automatically be interpreted as high-quality political participation. Citizens may share campaign messages without verifying their accuracy or understanding the policy implications of the candidate's program. Digital campaigning can therefore increase political visibility without necessarily increasing political knowledge. Research on social-media campaigns and political participation suggests that digital exposure can encourage participation, but misinformation remains a significant challenge (Afrita 2024). Volunteer networks consequently carry an important educational responsibility because their messages may be treated as informal sources of political information.

The problem becomes particularly serious when campaign mobilization is driven by emotional polarization. Political messages that construct opponents as threats, enemies, or morally illegitimate actors may produce stronger engagement than complex policy discussions. Research on digital campaign discourse in Indonesia shows that political communication can develop antagonistic narratives involving identity, provocation, and misinformation (Gusfa and Kadjuand 2020). Volunteer networks may unintentionally intensify this tendency because decentralized participants compete for attention. Content that is emotionally provocative can spread more rapidly than carefully explained policy information.

The democratic quality of digital mobilization therefore depends on communicative practices rather than technological capacity alone. Volunteer networks can expand political participation by making campaigns more accessible, interpersonal, and interactive. They can also become channels for manipulation, misinformation, and polarization. The difference lies in how volunteers understand their political role. If volunteers view themselves only as instruments for maximizing electoral support, communicative ethics may become secondary. If they understand themselves as citizen communicators, they have a stronger incentive to verify information, respect political opponents, and encourage informed participation.

The broader implication is that digital campaigning has transformed electoral mobilization from a centralized process into a networked process. Political parties and candidates remain important, but their messages increasingly depend upon citizen networks for circulation and interpretation. Volunteers provide the connective tissue between political institutions and everyday social relationships. Their democratic value therefore lies not simply in their ability to produce electoral enthusiasm but in their capacity to create informed and meaningful forms of citizen participation.

Democratic Volunteerism, Accountability, and the Limits of Decentralized Campaigning

The expansion of volunteer networks creates a paradox at the heart of digital electoral politics. The same autonomy that makes volunteer organizations attractive as vehicles of citizen participation can make them difficult to regulate. Formal campaign organizations generally have identifiable leaders, offices, and legal responsibilities. Volunteer networks may consist of multiple groups operating under similar political labels but without a unified command structure. This creates uncertainty about who should be held responsible when campaign communication becomes misleading, defamatory, or inflammatory. Research concerning political volunteers in Indonesia emphasizes that their position outside conventional party structures creates distinctive questions concerning institutional responsibility and political regulation (Syauket 2022; Rinaldi, Ridho, and Ginting 2024).

Accountability is especially difficult when volunteers claim independence from candidates. Autonomy can be democratically valuable because it allows citizens to participate without becoming instruments of party organizations. Yet political independence should not be confused with the absence of responsibility. If volunteers deliberately promote a candidate, their communication can influence electoral choices even if they have no formal organizational position. Democratic political communication requires responsibility to audiences regardless of whether the communicator is officially registered as part of the campaign.

The potential for clientelism makes this problem more complicated. Volunteer networks may develop relationships with candidates based on expectations of access, recognition, or material benefits. Research concerning political volunteers in Lampung warns that volunteer organizations may create opportunities for clientelist relationships between political actors and supporters (Putra, Hertanto, and Warganegara 2022). If volunteerism becomes dependent upon political exchange, its democratic meaning changes. Citizens are no longer participating primarily to influence public policy or support political ideas; instead, participation becomes connected to expectations of political reward.

The distinction between citizen activism and political patronage is therefore essential. A democratic volunteer is not merely an unpaid campaign worker. Democratic volunteerism implies that citizens retain political agency and can evaluate the candidate they support. They should be capable of criticizing political decisions even after an election victory. Arianto's research on post-election volunteers demonstrates that some volunteer groups transformed into forms of political monitoring, while others became passive or closely attached to power (Arianto 2016). This variation demonstrates that the democratic consequences of volunteerism depend on what happens after electoral mobilization.

Digital communication can strengthen post-election accountability because volunteer networks retain the capacity to communicate rapidly after elections. A network that once mobilized voters can potentially mobilize public criticism,

disseminate policy information, or monitor government performance. This possibility makes volunteerism relevant beyond campaign periods. However, it requires volunteers to maintain a degree of independence from political power. If their organizational survival depends entirely on continued access to elected officials, their capacity to monitor those officials becomes weaker.

Political literacy becomes central to this question. Volunteers require sufficient knowledge to distinguish policy information from propaganda, verified facts from rumors, and legitimate criticism from political manipulation. Senova's analysis of volunteer campaigning highlights the importance of media literacy in organizing and communicating political information (Senova 2016). In a digital environment where information moves rapidly, literacy is not an optional technical skill. It is part of the democratic competence required of citizen political communicators.

Political literacy also concerns the ability to interpret campaign promises. A volunteer who understands politics only as candidate promotion may reproduce slogans without examining their policy implications. Conversely, politically literate volunteers can explain why a particular policy matters, compare alternative proposals, and encourage voters to make independent judgments. Research on political literacy among Indonesian youth indicates that digital political communication can create opportunities for political learning but requires citizens to critically process the information they encounter (Sulaiman, Fauzi, and Viviani 2024). Volunteer networks can become important informal spaces for such political education.

Another challenge involves message discipline. Formal campaign organizations often attempt to maintain consistency in candidate narratives. Decentralized volunteer networks make this difficult because individual supporters have considerable freedom to create content. A campaign may therefore contain contradictory messages produced by different volunteer groups. While diversity can be democratically valuable, uncontrolled inconsistency can create confusion and weaken public trust. Research on digital campaigning indicates that campaign effectiveness depends partly on the ability to coordinate content while adapting messages to different audiences (Yahya, Febrianti, and Rasyad 2023).

The problem of misinformation requires a particularly strong response. Digital volunteer networks can unintentionally become distribution channels for false information because supporters are motivated to defend candidates or attack opponents. The rapidity of digital communication encourages sharing before verification. Research on electoral communication in Indonesia identifies misinformation and political attacks as major challenges to digital campaigning (Afrita 2024). Volunteers therefore require internal practices for checking information before redistribution. Such practices could include source verification, cross-checking official documents, and clearly distinguishing opinion from factual claims.

Political polarization presents another limitation. Volunteers often possess strong emotional commitment to candidates, and digital platforms can reinforce group identities. Once a volunteer network becomes organized around a particular political identity, criticism of the candidate may be interpreted as hostility toward the group itself. Research on Indonesian digital politics demonstrates that social-media campaign environments can develop polarized clusters and antagonistic narratives (Gusfa and Kadjuand 2020). Democratic volunteerism requires participants to retain the ability to disagree with political opponents without treating disagreement as illegitimate.

This does not mean that volunteers should avoid political competition. Electoral politics necessarily involves persuasion, contestation, and disagreement. The democratic problem emerges when competition eliminates the possibility of mutual recognition. Volunteer networks can strengthen democracy when they mobilize citizens to debate programs, evaluate candidates, and participate in elections. They weaken democratic communication when they substitute political argument with personal attacks, disinformation, or identity-based hostility. The objective is therefore not to depoliticize volunteers but to establish ethical boundaries within political competition.

Institutional transparency is another necessary component. Candidates and campaign organizations should clarify their relationships with volunteer networks. When volunteer groups receive campaign resources, communication materials, strategic instructions, or logistical support, such relationships should be disclosed rather than presented as completely spontaneous citizen activity. Research on the interaction between formal political organizations and volunteers demonstrates that the two can operate simultaneously, creating hybrid structures that require clearer institutional boundaries (Arifki 2021; Dermawan et al. 2024). Transparency can protect both candidates and volunteers from allegations of covert manipulation.

The same principle applies to digital political advertising and sponsored content. Citizens should be able to distinguish personal political expression from coordinated campaign communication. As digital campaigning becomes more sophisticated, the boundary between authentic grassroots support and professionally organized political messaging can become increasingly difficult to identify. Research on political marketing through social media indicates that digital platforms have become central to candidate image construction and audience targeting (Idris and Jamalullail 2025). The democratic challenge is to preserve the visibility of citizen participation while preventing strategic communication from being disguised as spontaneous public opinion.

The concept of democratic volunteerism proposed here therefore rests on five principles: autonomous participation, political literacy, communicative ethics, transparency, and accountability. Autonomy ensures that citizens are not merely instruments of political elites. Political literacy enables volunteers to evaluate and communicate political information responsibly. Communicative ethics limits misinformation and personal attacks. Transparency clarifies relationships between

volunteers and formal campaign organizations. Accountability ensures that political participation does not become a mechanism for escaping responsibility. Together, these principles provide a basis for evaluating whether grassroots digital campaigning strengthens or weakens democratic politics.

The central conclusion from this discussion is that decentralized political communication should not be judged simply by its organizational effectiveness. A volunteer network that mobilizes thousands of voters may be electorally successful while still damaging democratic communication if it relies on misinformation or intimidation. Conversely, a smaller network may have a stronger democratic contribution if it encourages political education, respectful debate, and independent citizen judgment. The quality of grassroots campaigning therefore depends on the relationship between mobilization capacity and democratic responsibility.

Conclusion

Grassroots digital campaigning has transformed the organization of electoral participation in Indonesia by enabling citizens to operate as political communicators, mobilizers, and intermediaries between candidates and communities. Political volunteers are no longer simply supplementary campaign workers. They constitute flexible networks that can recruit supporters, translate campaign narratives, distribute political information, and connect digital communication with offline community activities. Indonesian studies demonstrate that these networks emerged as significant forms of citizen participation and continued to evolve alongside the expansion of social media (Arianto 2014; Senova 2016; Rinaldi, Ridho, and Ginting 2024). The central finding is therefore that digital volunteerism expands the communicative infrastructure of elections by reducing the distance between political organizations and citizens.

At the same time, the decentralization that makes volunteer networks effective creates serious democratic challenges. The circulation of political messages through informal networks can obscure responsibility, facilitate misinformation, intensify polarization, and create opportunities for clientelistic relationships. Digital participation should therefore not be evaluated solely through reach, engagement, or electoral effectiveness. The concept of democratic volunteerism proposed in this article emphasizes that citizen-led campaigning should combine organizational autonomy with political literacy, ethical communication, transparency, and accountability. Volunteer networks can strengthen democracy when they allow citizens to participate actively while preserving their capacity for independent political judgment. They become problematic when autonomy is used to avoid responsibility for harmful political communication.

Future research should examine grassroots digital campaigning through longitudinal and comparative approaches. Future studies could compare volunteer networks across presidential elections, legislative elections, and local elections to

determine how organizational structures change according to electoral scale and political context. Research should also investigate the internal governance of volunteer networks, including recruitment, leadership, funding, relationships with campaign organizations, and post-election trajectories. Quantitative social-network analysis could identify how information travels between official campaign accounts, volunteer coordinators, influencers, and ordinary citizens, while qualitative research could explore how volunteers understand political responsibility. Such research would help determine whether Indonesia's expanding culture of political volunteerism represents a durable form of democratic citizen participation or an increasingly sophisticated extension of electoral campaigning.

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