

Research Paper

Comparative Legal Lessons from the 2015 and 2024 Riau Islands Gubernatorial Elections

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Abstract: This study examines the persistent challenge of regulatory fragmentation in Indonesia's decentralized electoral governance through a comparative legal analysis of the 2015 and 2024 gubernatorial elections in Riau Islands Province. Using a juridical-comparative approach combined with doctrinal legal analysis and process tracing, the research compares statutory frameworks, institutional coordination, and electoral outcomes. Data were drawn from official regulations, Provincial KPU reports, voter turnout statistics, and budget records. Findings show that while the 2024 election benefited from greater legal coherence than in 2015, unchecked subnational discretion most notably the reduction of polling stations from 4,654 to 3,327 resulted in lower voter turnout (77% to 54%) and reduced accessibility, particularly in remote archipelagic areas. The study argues that both normative misalignment and procedural discretion, when unbounded, undermine electoral inclusiveness and transparency. Theoretically, this article contributes to the discourse on legal pluralism and regulatory coherence by demonstrating how harmonization must integrate both legal standardization and procedural predictability. Practically, it proposes a unified Election Code, "bounded discretion" guidelines, and institutionalized inter-agency coordination to safeguard electoral integrity.

Keywords: Electoral Governance, Legal Fragmentation, Legal Harmonization, Polling Access Inequality, Subnational Democracy.



1. Introduction

The decentralization of electoral democracy in Indonesia after the Reform era has positioned direct gubernatorial elections as a cornerstone of local political participation. However, this institutional progress has often been undermined by the lack of harmonization between national electoral laws and their subnational implementation.

Recent studies indicate that the fragmentation between the General Elections Law and the Regional Head Elections Law generates overlapping mandates, inconsistent oversight, and administrative inefficiencies, ultimately eroding public trust in the democratic process.

The 2015 Riau Islands gubernatorial election took place under conditions of legal uncertainty following rapid legislative shifts from Law No. 22/2014 to Perppu No. 1/2014 and later Law No. 8/2015 which disrupted budget planning, institutional coordination, and election preparation mechanisms.

These two cases legal fragmentation in 2015 and technical fragmentation in 2024 demonstrate the recurring tension between legal coherence and administrative flexibility, with direct implications for electoral access, procedural transparency, and democratic legitimacy.

This article adopts a comparative juridical approach to analyze the legal and operational fragmentation observed in the 2015 and 2024 Riau Islands gubernatorial elections. It draws on official data from the Provincial General Elections Commission (KPU Kepri), polling logistics, budgeting records, and international electoral standards.

The study seeks to identify the legal consequences of regulatory dissonance, examine the democratic impacts of decentralized technical decisions, and propose structural solutions for achieving electoral law harmonization at the subnational level. By examining two electoral cycles in a single province, this article provides both theoretical insights into legal pluralism and practical policy recommendations for legislators, electoral commissions, and regional governments in safeguarding electoral integrity within Indonesia's decentralized system.

This article aims to investigate the legal and institutional consequences of regulatory fragmentation during the 2015 gubernatorial election; evaluate the operational and democratic implications of decentralized technical discretion in the 2024 election; and identify key legal and procedural elements that could inform a more harmonized electoral framework in future regional elections. These objectives are grounded in a comparative legal analysis of both electoral cycles, using official KPU documents, polling data, and electoral law texts to trace the effects of fragmentation on legitimacy, efficiency, and voter participation.

Ultimately, this study contributes both theoretically and practically to the discourse on legal pluralism and electoral governance in emerging democracies. Theoretically, it offers a grounded understanding of how fragmented legal regimes weaken democratic infrastructure. Practically, it proposes actionable reforms for harmonizing electoral regulation across levels of government, with Riau Islands as a compelling empirical lens through which to assess the cost of disjointed electoral law in Indonesia's decentralized democracy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Legal Fragmentation in Electoral Law

Legal fragmentation in electoral governance refers to the coexistence of multiple, often conflicting, legal norms governing electoral processes. In Indonesia, this has manifested in inconsistencies between the national electoral law (Law Number 7/2017) and the regional elections law (Law Number 10/2016), leading to conflicting institutional mandates and procedural ambiguity [1]. These inconsistencies are exacerbated when last-minute legislative changes, such as the 2014 shift from indirect to direct local elections, disrupt preparation and institutional roles [2] [3].

Fragmentation is not merely a product of poor drafting but reflects underlying tensions between national-level political control and local autonomy, which are often poorly negotiated through legal mechanisms [4]. Such regulatory dissonance often manifests in sudden changes in election schedules, shifting criteria for candidacy, or dual interpretations of supervisory authority, leading to governance paralysis.

In the Indonesian context, the consequences of legal fragmentation are both practical and normative. Practically, it leads to delays in funding, procurement, and voter registration. Normatively, it erodes public trust in the legal integrity of the election system, as demonstrated in the 2015 Riau Islands gubernatorial election [5] [6].

Other scholars argue for a multi-level legal alignment model, wherein national electoral principles are embedded into regional regulations through mechanisms such as hierarchical legal harmonization and judicial interpretation [7]. These mechanisms, however, require political will and constitutional support that are not always present in Indonesia.

Legal pluralism theory also explains how fragmentation can emerge organically in systems with decentralized authority, diverse jurisdictions, and informal governance practices [8]. In this sense, fragmentation is not always a failure but a symptom of systemic complexity that needs to be managed, not eliminated.

In Indonesia's case, however, the combination of legal pluralism and political expediency often results in unstable legal environments that weaken institutional performance during elections. The risk is not only mismanagement but also democratic deconsolidation, as electoral rules become tools of political maneuvering rather than instruments of public accountability [9].

Thus, addressing legal fragmentation requires both institutional reform and normative clarity: law must not only coordinate institutions but also reinforce public confidence in electoral justice.

2.2. Decentralized Electoral Administration and Local Discretion

Decentralized electoral administration has been championed as a way to bring governance closer to the people, allowing for responsive and context-specific electoral implementation. In Indonesia, this model is executed through provincial and regency-level KPU offices, which hold authority over logistics, voter registration, and public information campaigns [10].

While decentralization has allowed for innovation in voter outreach and conflict management, it also introduces variability in implementation, particularly when legal standards are vague or allow broad discretion. Regional KPUs often operate in silos, interpreting national regulations through local political, geographic, and budgetary lenses [11].

Research on administrative discretion cautions against the over-delegation of electoral authority without robust oversight mechanisms. Decentralized units often lack the capacity or independence to resist local elite influence, leading to patronage politics and electoral favoritism [12].

The World Bank identifies that successful decentralized election systems are those where local bodies are given clear mandates, sufficient resources, and are held accountable through audit, review, and citizen complaint mechanisms [13]. Indonesia's system has yet to fully meet these conditions.

Some scholars suggest the application of "bounded discretion," where local adaptation is allowed but within predefined legal and ethical parameters. This model ensures innovation without compromising standardization [14].

The challenge, however, is institutional: local KPUs are often under pressure to meet short deadlines, insufficient budgets, and ambiguous regulatory signals from the national level. As a result, they prioritize administrative feasibility over democratic inclusivity.

Field research in Eastern Indonesia has shown that such conditions lead to disparities in election quality across provinces, especially in archipelagic and remote regions [15]. This suggests that decentralization without equitable resource distribution contributes to structural inequality in democratic access.

Another issue is data integrity. Decentralized data collection on voter rolls often leads to double entries, omissions, or inconsistencies, particularly when updates rely on underfunded local bureaucracies [16].

Moreover, information dissemination suffers under decentralization. Variations in digital access, budget for education campaigns, and local media penetration mean that some voters are better informed than others, undermining electoral equality [17].

Thus, while decentralization offers flexibility, it must be balanced by central guidance, legal limits on discretion, and performance audits. The 2024 case in Riau Islands provides a contemporary warning about the risks of decentralization without harmonization.

A growing body of evidence suggests that Indonesia's decentralized electoral governance must evolve toward an "integrated autonomy" model empowering local units while holding them accountable to unified legal and democratic standards [18].

2.3. Harmonizing Electoral Governance: Comparative Perspectives across Indonesian Provinces

While electoral harmonization is often discussed in abstract legal terms, comparative evidence from various Indonesian provinces reveals the concrete implications of inconsistent governance

frameworks. Although the national legal basis for regional elections is standardized under Law No. 10 of 2016, its interpretation and operationalization vary significantly across jurisdictions [19] [20].

For instance, the 2020 gubernatorial election in Yogyakarta was praised for its clarity in planning and communication, due in part to the strong coordination between the local KPU and Bawaslu, and the proactive issuance of local regulations that complemented national rules [21]. This contrasts with regions such as Papua or North Maluku, where limited infrastructure and conflicting interpretations of eligibility and campaign procedures led to prolonged disputes and delayed results [22].

The case of West Java in 2018 demonstrated effective harmonization through the integration of digital voter registration, early logistics deployment, and centralized monitoring protocols all of which were supported by strong budget execution and provincial commitment to transparency [23]. Meanwhile, in Central Kalimantan, overlapping roles between provincial and district-level election committees created confusion in resolving campaign violations, resulting in delays in administrative sanctions [24].

These discrepancies suggest that harmonization is not solely a matter of legislative design, but also of institutional coordination, political will, and administrative capacity. In Bali, the KPU successfully aligned all election stages with national regulations, partly due to stable provincial leadership and minimal political interference. The Bali experience stands in contrast to the 2020 election in South Sulawesi, where internal disputes within KPU and inconsistent interpretations of health protocols led to public criticism and declining voter trust [25].

Scholars argue that regions with consistent institutional alignment such as East Java exhibit lower rates of electoral dispute and higher compliance with procedural timelines [26]. Conversely, provinces with fragmented institutional arrangements tend to experience legal uncertainty, increased litigation, and public distrust, even when national laws remain unchanged.

This pattern reveals that legal harmonization must be implemented not just vertically (between national and regional levels) but also horizontally, among regional stakeholders such as KPUD, Bawaslu, and local legislatures. Where these bodies operate under mutual understanding and common protocols, the risk of interpretive divergence is significantly reduced [27].

Empirical analysis also indicates that provinces with embedded legal support systems such as access to in-house legal experts within regional KPUs are better equipped to apply national laws consistently and resolve ambiguities without escalating to judicial review. This administrative legalism fosters both efficiency and accountability [28].

In sum, the Indonesian experience shows that harmonizing electoral governance is not merely a legal challenge but a multidimensional task involving administrative design, institutional culture, and interagency coordination. Lessons from provinces such as West Java, Bali, and East Java point toward the possibility of harmonized practice even in a decentralized system provided that institutions share a clear legal understanding and commit to procedural consistency.

The literature on legal fragmentation reveals how overlapping mandates and misaligned statutes have undermined electoral governance in decentralized systems like Indonesia. To explain this phenomenon, the concept of legal pluralism is especially relevant, as it highlights the coexistence of multiple legal sources and interpretations within a single system [29] [30]. In the context of elections, pluralism manifests in the gap between national legislation and regional implementation, often leading to inconsistent practices, regulatory ambiguity, and contested interpretations of authority.

To address this, scholars emphasize the need for regulatory coherence, which refers to the alignment of legal instruments and administrative actions across levels of governance. A coherent regulatory framework ensures clarity of institutional roles, uniform electoral procedures, and greater public trust. Coherence is not merely a legal drafting issue but also involves the standardization of practice, shared interpretive culture, and inter-agency coordination, especially in fragmented democracies.

Lastly, the electoral integrity framework provides a normative lens to assess the consequences of legal and administrative fragmentation on democratic outcomes. It argues that legality alone does not guarantee fairness, unless supported by inclusiveness, transparency, and accessibility. Applying this integrated framework enables a systematic understanding of how Indonesia's decentralized electoral system struggles to uphold legal certainty and democratic legitimacy issues that become particularly visible in comparative cases like the 2015 and 2024 Riau Islands gubernatorial elections.

2.4. Comparative Electoral Governance Patterns in Asian Contexts

Comparative experiences from other Asian democracies provide valuable insights into how decentralization, legal coherence, and procedural predictability shape electoral governance. The Philippines, for example, conducts synchronized national and local elections under the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), which operates as an independent constitutional body with both national oversight and subnational implementation capacity. While this centralized structure reduces the risk of legal fragmentation, local political patronage often undermines procedural fairness, particularly in remote island provinces similar to the Riau Islands context. Studies show that while statutory alignment is relatively strong, weak enforcement mechanisms and vote-buying practices persist as structural challenges to electoral integrity [31].

India offers a different model, where the Election Commission of India (ECI) maintains a high degree of central authority over both national and state-level elections. Legal harmonization is facilitated through the Representation of the People Acts (1950 and 1951), which provide a unified statutory framework. However, the country's vast geographic diversity and multi-tiered administrative system create logistical disparities, particularly in rural and tribal regions. Although polling station accessibility is mandated through ECI guidelines, practical implementation often depends on local administrative capacity, which can vary significantly between states [32].

Thailand's subnational electoral governance demonstrates the consequences of fluctuating legal frameworks amid political instability. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) is tasked with implementing national standards at the provincial level, but frequent constitutional changes and amendments to electoral laws especially during transitions between civilian and military governments have resulted in inconsistent application of procedures. In the 2019 general election, for instance, variations in ballot-counting methods and discrepancies in candidate qualification rules led to disputes and eroded public trust [33].

These Asian cases reveal three key lessons for Indonesia's regional elections. First, statutory harmonization at the national level, as in India, does not automatically guarantee procedural equity without robust local capacity-building. Second, independent electoral commissions with strong national oversight, as in the Philippines, can reduce legal fragmentation but must be insulated from local elite capture. Third, the Thai experience illustrates the dangers of frequent legal amendments without adequate institutional adaptation echoing Indonesia's own 2015 gubernatorial election challenges. By situating the Riau Islands cases within this comparative Asian context, the present study underscores that harmonization requires both stable legal frameworks and consistent subnational implementation to uphold electoral integrity in diverse, decentralized democracies.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a juridical-comparative approach to investigate the fragmentation and harmonization of electoral law in the context of Indonesia's decentralized democracy. Specifically, it compares two cycles of gubernatorial elections in Riau Islands Province 2015 and 2024 focusing on the legal framework, institutional coordination, and electoral outcomes. The aim is to identify the extent to which regulatory fragmentation affected electoral integrity and what normative solutions can be proposed for harmonization.

At the core of this approach is doctrinal legal analysis, which involves a systematic examination of statutory instruments, regulatory texts, and jurisprudence related to electoral governance. The key legal sources include Law No. 10 of 2016 on Regional Head Elections, Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections, and various General Election Commission (KPU) regulations particularly PKPU No. 2 of 2024 concerning electoral implementation. These are analyzed in conjunction with official documents from the Riau Islands Provincial KPU, including electoral budgets, logistics reports, voter turnout records, and post-election evaluations.

Complementing the legal analysis is the use of empirical electoral data, particularly regarding the number and distribution of polling stations, budget allocations and returns, voter turnout percentages, and reported disputes or complaints. This data is drawn from publicly available sources such as KPU Kepri's official website, verified media reports, and national statistical repositories. The juxtaposition of legal norms with real-world implementation provides insight into how fragmentation manifests both formally and functionally.

To ensure analytical depth, this study uses process tracing to map the institutional and legal developments over time starting with the 2015 election, and leading up to the 2024 election, characterized by decentralized operational discretion. This longitudinal perspective helps isolate

critical moments where harmonization failed or succeeded, and draws attention to institutional behavior under varying legal certainty.

The analysis follows a three-step operational framework shows in Table 1.

Table 1. Three-Step Operational Framework

Step	Analytical Focus	Data/Source	Evaluation Criteria
Legal Framework Analysis	Identify statutory changes and regulatory coherence in each election cycle	Laws, KPU regulations, court decisions	Stability, clarity, alignment of mandates
Institutional & Procedural Mapping	Trace institutional coordination, budget flow, and operational decisions	KPU & Bawaslu reports, MoUs, budget documents	Coordination effectiveness, procedural predictability
Democratic Outcome Assessment	Compare electoral accessibility, transparency, and participation	Polling station data, turnout, dispute records	Inclusiveness, fairness, public trust indicators

Process tracing is applied to reconstruct the sequence of legal and procedural changes across both elections, identifying critical junctures where harmonization succeeded or failed. This longitudinal approach makes it possible to link specific legal provisions or institutional decisions to observable electoral outcomes.

In interpreting findings, the study draws on the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier: legal pluralism, to understand the co-existence and conflict among legal orders; regulatory coherence, to assess the alignment of institutions and procedures; and electoral integrity, to evaluate the democratic consequences of legal fragmentation. These frameworks shape both the criteria for comparison and the formulation of normative recommendations.

4. Finding and Discussion

4.1. Legal and Institutional Consequences of Regulatory Fragmentation in 2015

The 2015 gubernatorial election in Riau Islands Province was held in a period of legal flux marked by overlapping legislation, contradictory mandates, and institutional uncertainty. At the heart of this confusion was the rapid succession from Law No. 22/2014 to Perppu No. 1/2014, followed by Law Number 8/2015. Each regulatory shift introduced new stipulations regarding election timing, budgeting authority, and institutional roles yet none were fully harmonized with the existing implementation structures at the regional level.

One concrete manifestation of this fragmentation was the delay in budget allocation for election preparation. The Provincial KPU struggled to access funds in a timely manner due to ambiguity in determining which institution provincial government, Ministry of Home Affairs, or Bawaslu had final authority over budget approval. The situation was further complicated by differing interpretations of eligibility and nomination procedures, resulting in litigation over candidate registration that delayed the campaign calendar.

Moreover, institutional coordination between KPU, Bawaslu, and DKPP in 2015 was reactive rather than integrated. Legal uncertainty hampered joint decision-making and reduced the operational capacity of local electoral bodies. This not only impacted voter registration and campaign monitoring but also created loopholes in conflict resolution mechanisms. Disputes had to be escalated to the national level due to lack of procedural clarity at the provincial level, contributing to public skepticism and reduced institutional trust.

These findings underscore that legal fragmentation when not addressed through timely harmonization undermines both the efficiency and legitimacy of the electoral process. The 2015 Riau Islands election thus illustrates the dangers of legal dualism in a decentralized system: when laws change faster than institutions can adapt, democratic procedures are compromised at the local level.

4.2. Operational and Democratic Implications of Technical Discretion in 2024

Unlike in 2015, the 2024 gubernatorial election was held under a more stable regulatory framework Law No. 10/2016 and PKPU No. 2/2024 but saw significant operational fragmentation due to discretionary decisions made by local electoral bodies. Most notably, the Provincial KPU reduced the number of polling stations from 4,654 to 3,327, citing efficiency and fiscal prudence. As a result, more than IDR 53 billion in budget was returned to the state, a move presented as a success in budget discipline.

However, this technical decision had profound consequences for voter access and participation. Voter turnout dropped from approximately 77% in 2020 to 54% in 2024, with several regions reporting logistical delays, long queues, and confusion regarding polling locations. Analysis shows that archipelagic areas were disproportionately affected by the reduction of polling stations, as voters were required to travel further, often crossing bodies of water without adequate transportation support.

While KPU Kepri followed existing legal guidelines in executing these changes, the absence of a normative framework governing local adaptation resulted in unbalanced access. The application of discretion though lawful failed to meet the principles of inclusivity and accessibility central to electoral integrity. Moreover, public communication regarding the changes was minimal, and civil society groups were not meaningfully involved in the planning or oversight stages.

This reveals that legal stability is not a sufficient condition for procedural fairness. Where local bodies possess wide discretion without bounded guidelines or participatory mechanisms, democratic deficits may persist. The 2024 election in Riau Islands thereby reflects a new form of fragmentation not normative, but procedural that endangers equal participation in elections.

The comparative analysis of the 2015 and 2024 elections indicates that harmonization must address two interrelated dimensions: legal standardization and procedural predictability. A harmonized electoral framework should eliminate dualism between national and subnational electoral laws by consolidating the Regional Head Election Law and the General Election Law into a single Election Code. Such a code must contain clearly delineated responsibilities for provincial KPUs, thresholds for discretion, and mechanisms for real-time coordination across institutions.

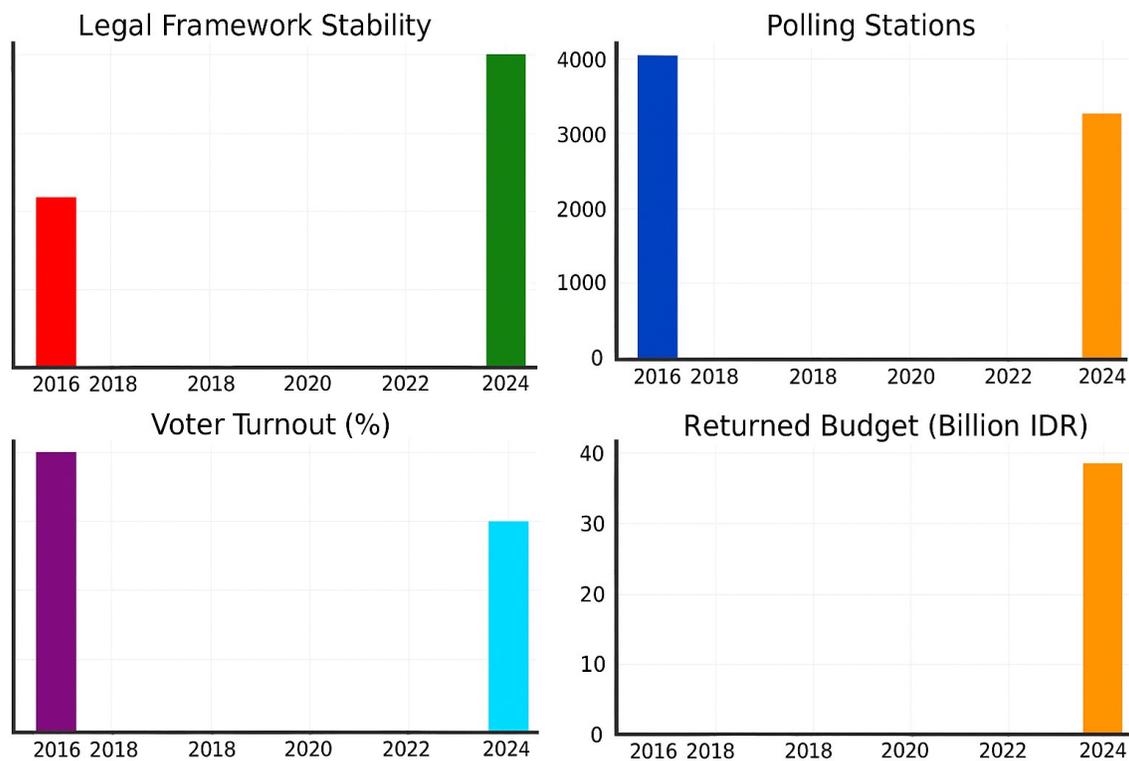


Figure 1. Comparative Overview 2015 vs. 2024 Riau Islands Gubernatorial Elections

Additionally, harmonization requires institutional redesign. Inter-agency coordination must be formalized through binding memoranda of understanding (MoUs) among KPU, Bawaslu, and DKPP at the provincial level. These agreements should be guided by national frameworks but tailored to local contexts. To prevent overcentralization, the system should implement “bounded discretion” a model that allows local adaptation within legal and democratic guardrails.

Capacity-building is equally critical. Provinces must be equipped with legal advisory units within KPU structures to ensure consistent interpretation of regulatory texts. Budget planning should adopt multi-year allocations to reduce dependence on late-stage negotiations. Furthermore, standard operating procedures for stakeholder consultation, voter outreach, and emergency response should be nationally issued but locally contextualized.

Finally, electoral monitoring and evaluation reports must be standardized and published post-election to build transparency and institutional learning. The 2024 experience in Riau Islands with its fiscal efficiency but democratic trade-offs offer a cautionary tale. Harmonization is not about uniformity but about structured coherence: making sure that laws and institutions work in concert, rather than at cross-purposes, in the service of democratic legitimacy.

1) Legal Framework Stability

The first chart shows a significant improvement in the perceived stability of the legal framework governing the Riau Islands gubernatorial elections, increasing from a rating of 2 in 2015 to 4 in 2024 on a 5-point scale. This increase reflects the transition from a period of regulatory changes marked by rapid shifts between laws and presidential decrees in 2015 to a more consolidated legal regime by 2024. The adoption of Law No. 10 of 2016 and the issuance of PKPU No. 2 of 2024 provided clearer guidelines for election procedures, timelines, and institutional roles, thus reducing confusion among electoral bodies and stakeholders.

However, this legal stability should not be mistaken for comprehensive harmonization. While the normative framework became more coherent, implementation still suffered from fragmented interpretation at the subnational level. The absence of mechanisms to ensure consistent application across provinces suggests that formal legal clarity alone does not guarantee uniform electoral quality. This gap between normative coherence and procedural effectiveness would later become more visible in operational decisions, as reflected in the subsequent charts.

2) Number of Polling Stations

A notable operational shift occurred in the reduction of polling stations from 4,654 in 2015 to 3,327 in 2024. This decision, justified by the Provincial KPU as a cost-saving measure, was made without a publicly deliberated access-impact assessment. While it may reflect greater administrative efficiency, particularly in logistics and staffing, it also raises equity concerns, especially for voters in archipelagic and rural areas where physical access to polling sites is already a challenge.

The substantial drop-in polling stations likely disrupted the geographic accessibility of voting, requiring longer travel distances and contributing to logistical bottlenecks. In an area like the Riau Islands characterized by sea-bound constituencies and limited transportation infrastructure such changes disproportionately affect marginalized communities. Thus, the data suggests that efficiency-driven discretion, if unchecked by normative safeguards or participatory mechanisms, can inadvertently reduce the inclusiveness and fairness of elections.

3) Voter Turnout

Closely linked to the reduction in polling stations is the steep decline in voter turnout, which fell from 77% in 2015 to only 54% in 2024. This sharp drop suggests that the decision to cut down polling locations may have negatively impacted voter participation. Although turnout is a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple variables such as political competitiveness, weather, and civic engagement the structural accessibility of polling locations remains a foundational determinant.

The data implies that operational efficiency may have come at the cost of democratic access. Without complementary measures such as increased early voting, mobile polling units, or voter transport services, the contraction in polling sites likely suppressed participation, particularly among voters in remote or underserved areas. This reinforces concerns that technical discretion, if exercised without a normative framework prioritizing inclusivity, can unintentionally erode the core democratic values of electoral accessibility and equality.

4) Budget Utilization and Disputes

The final charts present two contrasting outcomes: on the one hand, the 2024 election returned IDR 53 billion to the state budget, a stark contrast to 2015 when all funds were utilized amid regulatory confusion. This return has been celebrated by some as a marker of fiscal discipline. However, when juxtaposed with declining turnout and reduced polling infrastructure, the unspent budget raises concerns about the adequacy of resource deployment in safeguarding electoral access and quality.

Simultaneously, the number of reported electoral disputes declined from 12 in 2015 to just 5 in 2024. While this could signal improvements in electoral management and legal clarity, it might also reflect reduced civic engagement or diminished public oversight capacity. Without deeper analysis of the nature, visibility, and resolution of disputes, this reduction cannot be uncritically interpreted as progress. Together, the data invites a nuanced interpretation: financial efficiency and low dispute rates are not inherently positive if achieved at the expense of democratic inclusiveness and procedural transparency.

5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the 2015 and 2024 gubernatorial elections in Riau Islands Province reveals that electoral governance in Indonesia continues to be shaped by structural fragmentation both normative and procedural. In 2015, legal fragmentation, marked by overlapping laws and shifting mandates, resulted in delayed budgeting, institutional confusion, and reduced trust in electoral authorities. By contrast, the 2024 election, although conducted under a more stable legal regime, suffered from operational fragmentation caused by unchecked discretionary decisions at the subnational level.

These findings indicate that legal clarity alone does not guarantee democratic quality. While the 2024 electoral framework was normatively consistent, the reduction in polling stations and decline in voter turnout exposed the dangers of administrative discretion when it is not bounded by principles of accessibility, inclusion, and procedural fairness. The data suggests that efforts to increase fiscal efficiency and reduce operational complexity may inadvertently undermine democratic participation, particularly in geographically disadvantaged regions like Riau Islands.

The key insight from this study is that harmonization must be pursued not only at the level of legislation but also in the design of institutional coordination, technical guidelines, and oversight mechanisms. Electoral laws must be interpreted and implemented uniformly across provinces, while still allowing for local adaptation within structured and democratically anchored parameters. Legal pluralism, if unregulated, creates space for interpretive divergence; harmonization, therefore, must involve both legal consolidation and procedural predictability.

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed. First, Indonesia should consolidate its electoral laws particularly those governing general and regional elections into a unified legal code with clearly defined institutional mandates. Second, the KPU and Bawaslu must adopt “bounded discretion” frameworks to guide local decision-making, especially regarding budget utilization and polling station planning. Third, post-election evaluations and dispute data must be standardized and publicly disseminated to promote transparency and institutional learning.

Ultimately, the Riau Islands experience serves as both a cautionary tale and a learning opportunity for electoral reform in decentralized democracies. Harmonizing electoral governance is not about achieving absolute uniformity, but about building structured coherence that balances national standards with local realities. In doing so, Indonesia can strengthen the legitimacy, inclusiveness, and effectiveness of its democratic institutions both normatively and operationally.

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