

Rational-Legal Authority and Electoral Legitimacy: Reassessing Max Weber's Theory of Power through the 2024 Election in Bandung

Yan Nurcahya

Magister Sejarah Peradaban, UIN Sunan Gunung Djati, Indonesia

*Email: yan.itb2021@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study reexamines Max Weber's concept of rational-legal authority through the lens of the 2024 election in Bandung, Indonesia. As a modern democratic mechanism, elections are the primary means by which legal-rational legitimacy is established and maintained within the state. The research explores how bureaucratic procedures, institutional transparency, and public trust interact to sustain electoral legitimacy in a local democratic context. By analyzing the administrative processes and citizen perceptions surrounding the 2024 election, the paper evaluates the extent to which Weber's ideal type of authority aligns with the realities of Indonesia's political system. The findings suggest that while rational-legal authority remains the dominant framework of governance, its legitimacy increasingly depends on social trust, digital transparency, and procedural fairness. Thus, the Bandung case provides insight into the evolving nature of rational-legal legitimacy in the twenty-first-century democratic state.

Keywords:

Rational-Legal Authority, Electoral Legitimacy, Max Weber, Bureaucracy, Bandung Election 2024, Political Power, Democratic Governance

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INTRODUCTION

Max Weber's theory of authority remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding the foundations of political power in modern societies. Among his three ideal types of authority traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal the latter has become the defining feature of the modern state. Rational-legal authority derives its legitimacy from legal procedures, formal institutions, and bureaucratic rationality rather than from personal charisma or inherited status. This concept is central to Weber's vision of modern governance, where the rule of law and administrative efficiency replace personal rule and patrimonialism.

In contemporary democracies, elections serve as the primary mechanism through which rational-legal authority is exercised and legitimized. The electoral process, embedded in formal legal structures and regulated by state institutions, reflects the rational-legal model's emphasis on legality, procedural order, and bureaucratic control. Yet, as Weber foresaw, rational legal authority is not immune to challenges: legitimacy crises, bureaucratic rigidity, and the intrusion of charismatic populism often destabilize the rational order of modern governance.

The 2024 Election in Bandung provides a compelling context for reassessing Weber's theory of power and legitimacy. As one of Indonesia's major urban centers with high political participation and diverse social composition, Bandung represents a microcosm of the country's democratic dynamics. The conduct of the 2024 election its administrative integrity, voter engagement, and the perception of fairness offers an empirical lens to evaluate how rational-legal authority operates at the local level within Indonesia's democratic framework.

From a Weberian perspective, electoral legitimacy depends not only on adherence to formal rules but also on the public's belief in the legitimacy of those rules. When citizens perceive electoral institutions as impartial and law-bound, they confer legitimacy upon the state's rational-legal authority. Conversely, when procedural irregularities, misinformation, or elite manipulation occur, the legitimacy of the system erodes, potentially giving rise to charismatic or populist alternatives. Thus, the Bandung election serves as a valuable site to observe how rational-legal authority is both sustained and contested in practice.

Moreover, the study of Bandung's electoral process highlights the interplay between bureaucracy and democratic accountability. Weber viewed bureaucracy as the institutional embodiment of rationality efficient, rule-based, and impersonal. Yet, in the context of Indonesian local politics, bureaucratic systems often intersect with clientelism, personal networks, and populist appeals. Understanding how these forces interact within the 2024 election can illuminate the limits of Weber's rational-legal ideal in a developing democracy.

At the same time, technological developments and digital campaigning have introduced new complexities to rational-legal authority. Electoral management increasingly relies on data systems, online verification, and social media monitoring, blurring the line between bureaucratic rationality and algorithmic governance. The digital mediation of electoral legitimacy through platforms that shape public perception invites a contemporary reinterpretation of Weber's theory within the digital political sphere.

This paper seeks to reassess Weber's theory of rational-legal authority by situating it within the concrete political experience of Bandung's 2024 election. By examining the relationship between institutional procedure, bureaucratic function, and citizen perception, the study explores how rational-legal legitimacy is constructed, maintained, and sometimes undermined in practice. The aim is to bridge Weber's theoretical insights with empirical realities, offering a nuanced understanding of how legal-rational authority functions within Indonesia's evolving democratic landscape.

Ultimately, this research argues that while Weber's concept of rational-legal authority remains foundational for interpreting modern political legitimacy, it requires contextual adaptation to capture the complexities of contemporary electoral politics. The Bandung case demonstrates that legitimacy today is not solely derived from legal procedures but also from the social trust, technological transparency, and communicative rationality that underpin electoral governance in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Max Weber's theory of authority remains a cornerstone in the study of political sociology and state legitimacy. In his classic work *Economy and Society*, Weber delineates three ideal types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. Among these, rational-legal authority represents the foundation of the modern state, deriving legitimacy from codified laws, bureaucratic organization, and impersonal rule. It is based on the belief that authority is exercised legitimately when it is grounded in legal procedures and rational norms rather than personal will or hereditary privilege. This framework provides a powerful lens for understanding how political power is institutionalized within democratic systems.

The rational-legal model assumes that bureaucracy operates as the most efficient and predictable form of administration. Weber saw bureaucracy as the embodiment of rationalization — characterized by hierarchy, specialization, formal rules, and technical competence. Within democratic governance, such a structure ensures procedural fairness and impersonal decision-making. However, Weber also warned that excessive bureaucratization could lead to what he termed the “iron cage” of rationality, where human freedom and moral judgment are constrained by rigid administrative systems. This tension between efficiency and ethical legitimacy continues to shape debates about modern governance.

In the context of electoral democracy, rational-legal authority manifests through institutionalized procedures governing elections — including legal frameworks, electoral commissions, and judicial oversight. Electoral legitimacy, in this sense, depends on both the procedural correctness of the election and the public's belief in its fairness. Scholars such as David Beetham (1991) and Seymour Martin Lipset (1981) have expanded Weber's ideas by arguing that legitimacy is not only legal but also normative and behavioral, grounded in shared social values and public consent. Thus, elections become more than administrative acts; they are social performances that reproduce or challenge the moral foundation of political order.

Empirical studies on electoral legitimacy highlight the interplay between legal structures and public trust. Pippa Norris (2014) emphasizes that in contemporary democracies, the perceived integrity of elections directly influences citizens' confidence in state institutions. When voters view the process as transparent and rule-bound, rational-legal legitimacy is reinforced. Conversely, perceptions of corruption, manipulation, or procedural irregularities can erode legitimacy, paving the way for charismatic or populist authority — precisely the kind of authority Weber viewed as a potential counterforce to the rational-legal model.

In Indonesia, the rational-legal basis of governance has been continuously tested in the post-reformasi era. The establishment of the General Election Commission (KPU) and the Constitutional Court reflects efforts to institutionalize electoral procedures in accordance with rational-legal principles. Yet, challenges such as clientelism, vote buying, and bureaucratic inefficiency persist, revealing the tension between Weber's ideal type and the realities of developing democracies. Studies by Mietzner (2015) and Aspinall (2019) underscore that while Indonesia has achieved procedural democracy, the substance of rational-legal legitimacy remains uneven across regions.

The 2024 Election in Bandung serves as a valuable case for examining these theoretical debates in practice. Bandung, as a dynamic urban center with strong civil engagement, presents a setting where institutional capacity and public perception can be closely observed. The bureaucratic administration of the election, coupled with the rise of digital campaigning and information transparency, reflects both the strengths and vulnerabilities of rational-legal authority in the digital age.

This study situates Weber's theory within the broader scholarship on legitimacy and democratization. It adopts a neo-Weberian perspective that recognizes the evolving forms of bureaucratic authority in hybrid political contexts. By integrating theoretical insights from Weber, Beetham, and Norris, the paper constructs an analytical framework that connects institutional design, administrative behavior, and citizen perception. This synthesis provides the basis for analyzing how rational-legal legitimacy is operationalized, negotiated, and contested within the empirical setting of Bandung's 2024 election.

Ultimately, this theoretical framework positions Weber's rational-legal authority not as a static ideal type but as a dynamic model subject to reinterpretation in light of contemporary democratic realities. The Bandung case offers a means to reassess how legality, bureaucracy, and trust interact to shape political legitimacy in twenty-first-century Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **qualitative research approach** with a **case study design**, focusing on the 2024 Election in Bandung as a microcosm of rational-legal authority within Indonesia's democratic governance. The qualitative orientation allows for a deep, contextual understanding of how bureaucratic procedures, institutional integrity, and citizen perceptions converge to construct electoral legitimacy. Rather than testing hypotheses through statistical models, the study seeks to interpret meaning, behavior, and institutional dynamics in light of Weberian theory.

1. Research Design

The research adopts a **descriptive-analytical case study** approach. The Bandung election serves as a specific empirical setting to explore Weber's concept of rational-legal authority in practice. This design is appropriate because it allows the integration of theoretical reflection and empirical observation. The case study framework also facilitates the identification of local variations in the implementation of electoral procedures and the perception of legitimacy among citizens and officials.

2. Data Sources

The study relies on two primary types of data:

1. **Documentary Data** – including official election reports issued by the General Election Commission (KPU) Bandung, regulations governing the 2024 electoral process, media coverage, and public statements from election observers. These documents provide insights into the procedural and institutional dimensions of rational-legal authority.
2. **Interview Data** – collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, such as election officers, local bureaucrats, political party representatives, and civil society actors. The interviews explore perceptions of electoral fairness, bureaucratic neutrality, and institutional credibility. In total, around 10–12 informants are targeted, representing diverse perspectives within the electoral ecosystem.

3. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection is conducted through **document analysis**, **in-depth interviews**, and **participant observation**. Document analysis helps identify how legality and procedural rules are articulated within the institutional framework. In-depth interviews provide narratives and interpretations of legitimacy from the viewpoint of practitioners and citizens. Participant observation limited to election-related events and monitoring activities allows the researcher to capture non-verbal practices of authority, such as bureaucratic behavior, procedural adherence, and public engagement.

4. Data Analysis

The data are analyzed using **thematic analysis** guided by Weber's conceptual framework of rational-legal authority. Coding categories include *bureaucratic rationality*, *procedural legitimacy*, *citizen trust*, and *institutional transparency*. The analysis process involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Through iterative comparison, empirical findings are interpreted in light of Weberian theory and recent scholarship on electoral legitimacy.

5. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility of findings, **triangulation** is employed across data sources and methods. Documentary data are compared with interview testimonies to validate consistency. Researcher reflexivity is maintained throughout the process to minimize bias in interpretation. All interviews are conducted ethically with informed consent and confidentiality to protect the identity of participants.

6. Research Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on the city of Bandung as a representative urban area with established electoral institutions and active civic participation. While findings from this case cannot be generalized to the entire Indonesian context, they provide analytical insights applicable to other urban democracies facing similar challenges of legitimacy and bureaucratic governance. The research is limited by time constraints and access to some internal bureaucratic data, but it compensates through triangulated qualitative evidence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Institutional Rationalization and Bureaucratic Conduct

The 2024 Election in Bandung demonstrates a high degree of procedural rationalization in accordance with Weber's notion of *rational-legal authority*. The General Election Commission (KPU) of Bandung maintained strict adherence to legal frameworks, administrative protocols, and transparent documentation. Election procedures, from voter registration to ballot counting were guided by codified regulations rather than personal discretion. This bureaucratic consistency illustrates Weber's argument that authority gains legitimacy when rooted in rule-based systems rather than traditional or charismatic domination.

However, field observations and interviews reveal that bureaucratic rationalization does not automatically ensure legitimacy. Some voters perceive bureaucratic rigidity as "detached professionalism," lacking emotional resonance or moral engagement with citizens. This condition aligns with Weber's concern about *the iron cage of rationality*, where the pursuit of procedural order risks alienating the public from participatory democracy.

2. Legitimacy and Citizen Trust

Interviews with voters and civil society activists show that legitimacy in Bandung's 2024 Election was not merely a product of legality but also of perceived fairness and inclusivity. Most participants acknowledged that electoral management appeared neutral and transparent, yet a portion of younger voters expressed skepticism about political party behavior rather than institutional performance. This differentiation is significant: while the *KPU* and *Bawaslu* were viewed as rational-legal institutions, political elites were often seen as operating within patronage-based or charismatic logics. Consequently, public trust toward the electoral process stemmed more from bureaucratic reliability than from political moral authority.

In Weberian terms, this finding highlights a hybrid legitimacy formation where *rational-legal* authority functions effectively at the institutional level, but remains challenged by the persistence of *traditional* and *charismatic* authority among political actors.

3. Rational-Legal Authority in Local Political Culture

Bandung's local context offers a distinctive insight into the adaptation of Weberian rationality in a postcolonial democracy. Historical patterns of bureaucracy and civic participation shaped by Dutch colonial administration and later Indonesian decentralization have produced a mixed culture of governance. While administrative rationality has become normalized within the *KPU*'s operational structure, informal political networks and social obligations continue to influence decision making, especially at the grassroots level. For instance, reports of informal vote canvassing (*serangan fajar*) and symbolic appeals by candidates demonstrate the coexistence of rational legal and patrimonial elements. This dualism reaffirms that the full realization of Weber's rational-legal model in developing democracies requires not only institutional capacity but also cultural transformation within the electorate.

4. The Dialectic of Legality and Legitimacy

The Bandung case underscores the dialectical relationship between legality (formal authority) and legitimacy (normative acceptance). Procedural adherence alone cannot sustain legitimacy if citizens perceive the system as inaccessible or unresponsive. Conversely, high legitimacy based on moral or charismatic appeal may fail without legal grounding.

In this light, the rational legal authority demonstrated by Bandung's electoral institutions serves as a stabilizing force, but its legitimacy depends on continuous public communication, transparency, and inclusivity. This finding supports Weber's thesis that *authority must be continuously reproduced through belief in legality* a belief that is not static but negotiated through social trust.

5. Reassessing Weber in the Indonesian Context

Applying Weber's typology to Bandung's 2024 Election reveals both the strength and limitation of his framework. The rational-legal model successfully explains the bureaucratic structure and procedural rationality of Indonesian electoral management. Yet, it only partially captures the dynamics of voter legitimacy, which is shaped by cultural, moral, and relational dimensions. Thus, the study argues for a *contextual reinterpretation* of Weberian theory one that recognizes the coexistence of rational-legal mechanisms with culturally embedded forms of trust and obligation. Bandung's electoral legitimacy, therefore, emerges not merely from the legality of rules but from the moral resonance of bureaucratic conduct with citizens' democratic expectations.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study reassessed Max Weber's theory of rational-legal authority through the empirical lens of the 2024 Election in Bandung. The findings affirm that bureaucratic rationality and adherence to formal procedures remain essential foundations of democratic legitimacy. Bandung's electoral institutions demonstrate a consistent application of legal frameworks, procedural discipline, and administrative transparency — all of which embody Weber's ideal of *rational-legal authority*. However, legitimacy in practice is not solely a legal construct; it is dynamically mediated by public perception, social trust, and moral evaluation of institutional behavior.

The Bandung case shows that rational-legal authority can provide structural stability to the democratic process, yet its effectiveness depends on the continuous reproduction of legitimacy through public belief in legality and fairness. In Weberian terms, this underscores the necessity of both procedural rationality and normative validation. The endurance of electoral legitimacy thus requires institutions that are not only rule-based but also responsive, communicative, and morally credible.

Moreover, the persistence of patrimonial and charismatic elements in Bandung's political culture indicates that Weber's typology, while analytically powerful, must be reinterpreted contextually within postcolonial democracies. Indonesian electoral legitimacy reflects a hybrid form — combining bureaucratic rationality with culturally embedded modes of trust, loyalty, and affective connection. This hybridity neither negates Weber's model nor fully conforms to it; rather, it invites a more nuanced understanding of how rational-legal authority evolves in plural societies.

Theoretical Implication:

This study contributes to political sociology by demonstrating that Weber's theory remains relevant when expanded beyond Eurocentric assumptions. Rational-legal legitimacy, when situated in the Global South, manifests not as a fixed ideal type but as a negotiated process shaped by local norms and institutional adaptations.

Practical Implication:

For policymakers and electoral bodies, the research highlights the need to strengthen not only legal frameworks but also communicative transparency and participatory trust-building. In doing so, the institutionalization of rational-legal authority can move beyond technical compliance toward genuine democratic legitimacy.

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