

Local Political Competition and Bureaucratic Ethics: An Analysis of the Local Government Integrity Index in South Sulawesi

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ABSTRACT - This study provides an exploratory comparative examination of the relationship between local political competition and bureaucratic ethics across regency and municipal governments in South Sulawesi. It integrates the Corruption Eradication Commission's Integrity Assessment Survey, the 2024 simultaneous local election results, and evidence concerning civil servant neutrality. The study addresses the urgent concern that electoral competition may improve accountability while simultaneously intensifying patronage, bureaucratic politicisation, and corruption risks in weak institutional settings. Its novelty lies in comparing variations in electoral competition, ranging from single-candidate elections to four-candidate contests, with subnational bureaucratic integrity outcomes. The findings demonstrate that electoral competition is not linearly associated with bureaucratic integrity. Although Soppeng and Bulukumba recorded relatively stronger integrity performance, Makassar, Palopo, and Maros remained institutionally vulnerable despite differing levels of political contestation. Bureaucratic ethics are more strongly shaped by merit-based personnel management, safeguards against politically motivated appointments and transfers, internal oversight capacity, service digitalisation, and protection of civil servant neutrality. The study contributes a conditional institutional framework, arguing that political competition strengthens bureaucratic integrity only when supported by institutions capable of enforcing neutrality, accountability, meritocracy, and organisational integrity.

Keywords: *local politics, bureaucratic ethics, government integrity, civil service neutrality, bureaucratic meritocracy*

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, local politics in Indonesia has evolved within a framework of democratic decentralization intended to bring public decision-making closer to citizens and strengthen the accountability of subnational governments. However, the Indonesian literature reveals a persistent paradox: decentralization and the direct election of regional leaders have not consistently reduced corruption. In many cases, they have instead expanded opportunities for patronage, budget capture, and elite competition sustained by bureaucratic networks and access to state resources. Recent studies of local corruption in Indonesia indicate that research on anti-corruption initiatives at the subnational level remains fragmented (Henderson & Kuncoro, 2011; Tanujaya, 2025). Other studies further demonstrate that regional autonomy may create additional opportunities for misconduct when oversight mechanisms, transparency arrangements, and audit capacity fail to develop at the same pace as the devolution of political and administrative authority (Ferraz & Finan, 2025; Kleinman et al., 2014).

Theoretically, the relationship between political competition and government integrity is far from straightforward (Siboy & Sholahuddin Al-Fatih, 2025; Yagci et al., 2026). One strand of the literature conceptualizes electoral competition as a disciplinary mechanism for incumbent officials, as the prospect of electoral defeat may encourage greater responsiveness, stronger caution against corrupt practices, and increased attention to public service delivery. Other studies, however, suggest that when electoral uncertainty is high and institutional safeguards are weak, intensified political competition may generate perverse incentives (Dawson, 2022; Harvey, 2022). Candidates and their political networks may become more reliant on non-programmatic resource allocation, deepen clientelistic exchanges, or pressure the bureaucracy to act in a partisan manner (Buta & Farcas, 2025; Chiru, 2025). Political competition can therefore function as an instrument of democratic accountability, but it may also contribute to the deterioration of bureaucratic ethics when it is not constrained by merit-based institutions and robust oversight mechanisms (Afridi et al., 2024).

At this juncture, bureaucratic ethics becomes a central concern. Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission (*Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi, KPK*) defines the Integrity Assessment Survey (*Survei Penilaian Integritas, SPI*) as an instrument for assessing integrity levels and corruption risks across ministries, public agencies, and subnational governments, drawing on the experiences and perceptions of internal respondents, external stakeholders, and experts. This definition implies that bureaucratic integrity extends beyond formal compliance with rules; it also encompasses the quality of governance as experienced in public service delivery, human resource management, transparency, and organizational conduct (Bertelli & Falletti, 2026; Khamzina et al., 2025; Syamsir et al., 2026). The Election Supervisory Body (*Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, Bawaslu*) further emphasizes that civil service neutrality is essential to ensuring fair electoral competition between candidates who possess bureaucratic influence and those without comparable access to governmental power structures. From this perspective, bureaucratic ethics cannot be reduced merely to the absence of corruption (Onyango, 2022, 2024). It also requires freedom from political interference and conflicts of interest, as well as adherence to the principles of objectivity, impartiality, and professional independence.

Studies conducted in multiple countries have shown that merit-based recruiting is more consistently related with lower levels of corruption than programs that merely enhance compensation in the public sector or provide career stability (Dahlström et al., 2012). In a comparable manner, research conducted at the subnational level in Europe demonstrates that the

likelihood of corruption is typically lower in bureaucratic professions that are based on merit and professional judgment rather than political connections (Charron et al., 2017). In politically penetrated administrative systems, bureaucratic innovation and responsiveness also tend to decline.

More recent scholarship has advanced the concept of structural integrity, referring to the capacity of public organizations to preserve neutrality, accountability, transparency, and the rule of law under political pressure (Bertelli & Falletti, 2025; Modise & Modise, 2023). This capacity rests on a combination of legal protections, organizational procedures, and professional norms. Bureaucratic ethics, therefore, should not be treated as an isolated moral attribute of individual officials (Hashimov, 2025; Mendy, 2023). Rather, it is an institutional outcome produced by administrative arrangements that protect the bureaucracy from short-term political intervention and partisan capture.

Indonesia's current governance conditions further underscore the importance of this institutional perspective. In its official release of the 2024 Integrity Assessment Survey, the Corruption Eradication Commission reported a national integrity index score of 71.53, which remained within the vulnerable category (Fatahurrazak et al., 2025). The Commission also found that bribery and gratuities continued to occur in 97 percent of subnational governments, while the misuse of public facilities and institutional budgets was identified across all ministries, agencies, and subnational governments (Munyai, 2024). Gratuities associated with promotion and personnel transfers were likewise reported across all surveyed public institutions.

In 2025, the Commission reported that the national score had increased to 72.53, although it remained within the vulnerable category. The principal challenges included the persistence of bribery and illegal levies, weaknesses in human resource governance, declining effectiveness of anti-corruption dissemination, and the risk of manipulation in survey completion. These findings are particularly relevant to the study of bureaucratic ethics because they identify promotion, transfer, and broader personnel management processes as critical points of vulnerability in public-sector integrity (Roberts, 2025). Accordingly, bureaucratic integrity in Indonesia cannot be separated from the institutional arrangements governing appointments, career mobility, supervision, and protection against political interference (Eryanto et al., 2022; Kurniawati & Saprudin, 2025).

South Sulawesi provides a particularly compelling setting for this study because it combines intense local political competition with substantial variation across jurisdictions. The South Sulawesi Provincial Election Commission finalized the recapitulation of the 2024 gubernatorial election results through a plenary process held from 6 to 9 December 2024. Through its official 2024 simultaneous local election portal, the Commission also provides access to electoral documents for all regencies and municipalities in the province. The results across South Sulawesi's 24 regencies and municipalities reveal markedly diverse electoral configurations. Some jurisdictions featured contests between two candidate pairs, whereas others involved three or four pairs. Maros, for example, held a single-candidate election against the blank-box option. Voter turnout also varied considerably, ranging from 57.64 percent in Makassar City to 81.53 percent in Enrekang. Such variation makes South Sulawesi a valuable subnational laboratory for examining whether greater electoral competitiveness is associated with stronger bureaucratic ethics or, conversely, with heightened risks of bureaucratic politicization and declining institutional integrity.

At the same time, concerns regarding civil service neutrality were highly salient during the 2024 local elections in South Sulawesi. The South Sulawesi Election Supervisory Body explicitly identified civil service neutrality and vote buying as priority areas of electoral oversight. At the

national level, Bawaslu's SI-ASN monitoring system recorded 1,438 alleged violations of civil service neutrality in regency and mayoral elections. Of these cases, 1,307 resulted in formal recommendations, 819 had been followed up, and 458 had not yet received an official response. Although these national figures cannot be directly attributed to South Sulawesi, they demonstrate that the relationship between electoral contestation and bureaucratic conduct is not a marginal concern (Hamzah et al., 2025; Purwaningsih & Cahya Widodo, 2021). Rather, it represents a systemic governance problem that requires empirical investigation using integrity-based indicators, rather than relying solely on normative descriptions of bureaucratic impartiality (Kirmikiroglou et al., 2026; Soares, 2026).

This is where the principal research gap addressed by this article emerges. Existing Indonesian studies on bureaucratic neutrality in local elections have predominantly relied on qualitative case-study approaches, focusing on mechanisms of politicization, the mobilization of civil servants, and the distribution of state resources in the period preceding election day. Meanwhile, recent scholarship on local anti-corruption governance has emphasized that research on Indonesian subnational governments remains fragmented and has yet to establish a sufficiently systematic connection between electoral dynamics and nationally standardized indicators of bureaucratic integrity. In the specific context of South Sulawesi, relatively few studies have examined the relationship between variations in political competition during the 2024 local elections and the integrity performance of regency and municipal governments, as measured by the KPK's Integrity Assessment Survey, one of the most recent and publicly accessible instruments for evaluating institutional integrity (Abidin AS et al., 2025).

Against this background, the article asks: what is the relationship between local political competition and bureaucratic ethics across regency and municipal governments in South Sulawesi? More specifically, it examines whether variations in electoral competition—operationalized through the number of candidate pairs, margin of victory, presence of an uncontested or single-candidate race, and voter turnout—are associated with variations in bureaucratic integrity scores or categories recorded in the SPI. The article does not assume that political competition necessarily strengthens or undermines integrity. Instead, it advances the working hypothesis that the effects of electoral competition are conditional. Competition may enhance bureaucratic ethics when it is supported by a functioning merit system, effective internal oversight, and a strong organizational culture of integrity. Conversely, it may weaken bureaucratic ethics when administrative institutions remain vulnerable to partisan intervention and are used as instruments of electoral mobilization (Afridi et al., 2024).

Method

This article adopts an exploratory-comparative research design based on official government data (Boucher-Robinson et al., 2025; Rykkja & Agustí, 2023). The units of analysis are the regency and municipal governments in South Sulawesi Province. The first variable, local political competition, is operationalized through four indicators: the number of candidate pairs contesting the 2024 local elections, the presence of a single-candidate race versus a fully contested election, the margin of victory between the leading candidate pair and its nearest competitor, and voter turnout. These indicators are derived from the official recapitulation of the 2024 local election results across South Sulawesi's 24 regencies and municipalities, as compiled from publicly available General Elections Commission sources.

The second variable, bureaucratic ethics, is not measured in terms of individual morality. Instead, it is assessed through indicators of organizational integrity, particularly the scores or classifications produced by the Corruption Eradication Commission's Integrity Assessment Survey. These indicators are interpreted alongside evidence concerning civil service neutrality and bureaucratic corruption risks reported by the KPK and the Election Supervisory Body. This approach is consistent with the literature that conceptualizes bureaucratic integrity as an institutional quality reflected in administrative impartiality, merit-based personnel management, transparency, and the effective control of misconduct.

The data sources are organized into four categories. First, the study draws on official KPK documents, particularly the release of the 2024 SPI results, the KPK's SPI portal, and official publications concerning the implementation and follow-up of the 2025 survey. Second, it uses documents and publications issued by the South Sulawesi Provincial Election Commission, including the official announcement of the gubernatorial election recapitulation and the 2024 simultaneous local election results portal, which provides access to regency- and municipality-level documents. Third, the study incorporates Bawaslu materials, especially the SI-ASN portal, which provides the institutional definition of civil service neutrality and visualized data on alleged neutrality violations. Fourth, the analysis is informed by reputable academic literature addressing bureaucratic meritocracy, administrative politicization, democracy and corruption, as well as Indonesian studies of bureaucratic neutrality and local-level corruption. To maintain analytical rigor, the article distinguishes between authoritative primary sources and supplementary secondary sources.

The study employs pattern matching and cross-case comparison as its principal analytical techniques (Geng et al., 2023). Empirically, it does not claim strong causal inference, primarily because not all SPI scores for South Sulawesi's regencies and municipalities are publicly available in a uniform and readily extractable format. Instead, the analysis combines three forms of evidence: a province-wide mapping of political competition across all 24 jurisdictions; a focused examination of selected cases for which SPI data are publicly accessible; and a theoretically informed interpretation grounded in comparative scholarship on meritocracy, bureaucratic politicization, and electoral accountability. This strategy is appropriate for identifying relationships, contrasts, and recurring patterns, although it is not sufficient for a comprehensive econometric estimation. The article should therefore be understood as an exploratory study based on the most recent publicly available evidence, rather than as a definitive test of a causal model (Luijken et al., 2022; Palos-Sanchez et al., 2021).

The research contains two primary omissions or shortcomings. To begin, there isn't a uniform distribution of public access to subnational SPI scores. There are a number of instances in which figures at the level of the municipality or the regency are only accessible through the dissemination of information by websites of local governments or media sources, rather than through a single national dataset that is standardized. Second, rather than being based on direct ethnographic observation of the behavior of public servants, the indicators that are used to reflect those of bureaucratic ethics are mostly dependent on the impressions and experiences that are recorded by the institutions themselves. The SPI, on the other hand, was developed by the KPK with the intention of serving as a nationwide participation instrument for evaluating the dangers of corruption and the standards of institutional integrity. Consequently, it continues to be a proxy that can be defended analytically for the purpose of analyzing variances in bureaucratic ethics between subnational governments to be examined.

Result and Discussion

At the national level, the SPI findings indicate that bureaucratic integrity problems in Indonesia remain structural rather than incidental. The Corruption Eradication Commission reported that the 2024 SPI covered 641 institutions, including ministries and national agencies, provincial governments, regency and municipal governments, and state-owned enterprises. The national integrity index stood at 71.53, placing Indonesia within the vulnerable category. The KPK also identified serious integrity risks within subnational bureaucracies. Bribery and gratuities were reported in 97 percent of local governments, while the misuse of institutional facilities and budgets was found across all ministries, agencies, and subnational governments. Gratuities associated with personnel promotion and transfer processes were likewise detected throughout the public sector. In 2025, the KPK reported an increase in the national SPI score to 72.53; however, the score remained within the vulnerable category. The principal risk areas included weaknesses in human resource governance, the continued prevalence of bribery and illegal levies, ineffective anti-corruption communication, and attempts to influence respondents in order to artificially improve institutional scores. Substantively, the two official releases convey a consistent message: bureaucratic ethics in Indonesia cannot be reduced to the enforcement of anti-corruption laws. It also concerns an institutional architecture that remains insufficiently capable of protecting the bureaucracy from conflicts of interest, political interference, and the misuse of administrative discretion (Park, 2021).

Conceptually, these findings are highly consistent with the public administration literature. Merit-based recruitment has been shown to reduce corruption more consistently than financial incentives alone. Corruption risks in public procurement are also lower when bureaucratic careers are determined by professional merit and performance evaluation rather than political connections. Research on bureaucratic quality and electoral accountability further demonstrates that the quality of administrative institutions shapes the extent to which voters can accurately attribute public service outcomes to incumbent performance. The implication is clear: competitive local elections do not automatically improve government integrity when bureaucratic institutions remain weak (Ramasamy et al., 2026). Under such conditions, electoral competition may instead redirect the bureaucracy toward patronage, rent distribution, partisan mobilization, and personalized political loyalty.

Political competition in the 2024 local elections varied considerably across South Sulawesi. Makassar City had four candidate pairs and recorded voter turnout of only 57.64 percent. The winning pair received 54.72 percent of the vote, compared with 27.85 percent for the nearest competitor, resulting in a victory margin of 26.87 percentage points. Palopo City also had four candidate pairs, but the contest was substantially more competitive: the leading pair obtained 35.91 percent of the vote, while the runner-up received 35.28 percent, producing a margin of only 0.63 percentage points. Parepare City similarly had four candidate pairs, with the winner receiving 43.12 percent of the vote, the runner-up 27.82 percent, and voter turnout reaching 80.96 percent.

Soppeng featured a relatively balanced contest between two candidate pairs. The winning pair secured 56.52 percent of the vote, compared with 43.48 percent for its opponent, producing a margin of 13.04 percentage points and voter turnout of 79.32 percent. Bulukumba also had two candidate pairs, although the result was less competitive: the winner obtained 63.65 percent of the vote, compared with 36.35 percent for the opposing pair, yielding a margin of 27.30 percentage points and turnout of 65.77 percent. Maros represented the least competitive electoral configuration,

with a single candidate pair contesting against the blank-box option. The candidate pair received 64.01 percent of the vote, while the blank box obtained 35.99 percent. These results demonstrate that local political competition in South Sulawesi cannot be treated as a uniform phenomenon. Rather, it ranges from minimally competitive single-candidate elections to highly fragmented and closely contested multi-candidate races.

If political competition automatically strengthened bureaucratic ethics, jurisdictions with more intense electoral contests would be expected to demonstrate higher levels of governmental integrity than those with weaker competition. However, the available evidence from South Sulawesi does not reveal such a linear relationship. Reports referring to the KPK's 2025 SPI results indicate that only two jurisdictions in South Sulawesi achieved the Green or Safeguarded Zone category: Soppeng, with a score of 80.48, and Bulukumba, with a score of 78.15. By contrast, Makassar recorded a score of 67.93 and Palopo 68.27, placing both jurisdictions in the vulnerable category.

The same sources show that Soppeng's score increased from 76.65 in 2024 to 80.48 in 2025, after previously standing at 73.08 in 2023. Soppeng therefore not only performed comparatively well but also demonstrated a sustained improvement over time. Meanwhile, Maros, which had the least competitive electoral structure because of its single-candidate election, reportedly obtained an SPI score of 70.26 in 2025 and remained in the red or vulnerable category. This pattern is analytically important: a single-candidate election is not automatically associated with high integrity, just as an intensely competitive election is not necessarily associated with low integrity. Instead, the outcomes appear to depend on the institutional capacity of each jurisdiction.

The following table summarizes the most informative cases for which integrity data were publicly accessible.

Table 1. the most informative cases for which integrity data were publicly accessible.

Jurisdiction	2024 electoral structure	Victory margin	Voter turnout	Publicly accessible integrity status
Soppeng	Two candidate pairs	13.04 percentage points	79.32%	SPI 2025: 80.48, Green Zone; SPI 2024: 76.65
Bulukumba	Two candidate pairs	27.30 percentage points	65.77%	SPI 2025: 78.15, Green Zone
Makassar	Four candidate pairs	26.87 percentage points	57.64%	SPI 2025: 67.93, vulnerable
Palopo	Four candidate pairs	0.63 percentage points	76.33%	SPI 2025: 68.27, vulnerable
Maros	Single candidate versus blank box	28.02 percentage points	69.62%	SPI 2025: 70.26, vulnerable

Source: the recapitulation of the 2024 local election results in South Sulawesi and publicly available reports on the KPK's 2025 SPI findings.

Inferentially, the observed pattern is more consistent with a conditional relationship than with a linear association. Soppeng and Bulukumba demonstrate that jurisdictions with two-candidate contests can achieve relatively strong integrity outcomes when bureaucratic governance and internal control systems function effectively. Conversely, Makassar and Palopo show that fragmented or highly competitive elections do not automatically improve integrity; intense electoral competition may coexist with institutional vulnerability. Maros reinforces this argument from the opposite direction: limited competition arising from a single-candidate election does not necessarily produce a high-integrity bureaucracy.

In theoretical terms, the South Sulawesi cases suggest that political competition may be necessary for democratic accountability, but it is not sufficient to guarantee bureaucratic integrity. This conclusion is consistent with studies arguing that the positive effects of electoral competition on accountability depend substantially on bureaucratic quality. It also aligns with research showing that, under conditions of institutional weakness and electoral uncertainty, competition may generate perverse effects on corruption and administrative conduct.

The most plausible explanation lies in the governance of bureaucratic human resources. The KPK's official 2024 release explicitly reported that gratuities associated with promotions and personnel transfers occurred across ministries, agencies, and subnational governments. Its 2025 release similarly identified human resource management as one of the principal areas of integrity vulnerability. These findings suggest that the core of bureaucratic ethics concerns who is promoted, how rotations and transfers are administered, whether political loyalty supersedes professional standards, and whether officials are institutionally empowered to resist improper intervention.

Cross-national research has demonstrated that bureaucratic careers shaped by political connections are associated with greater corruption risks, whereas merit-based recruitment and protection from political interference tend to reduce those risks. In South Sulawesi, therefore, electoral competition is likely to improve bureaucratic ethics only when it is not accompanied by the politicization of promotion, transfer, appointment, and position allocation processes. This argument becomes even stronger when considered in relation to civil service neutrality. Bawaslu emphasizes that civil service neutrality is required to ensure fair elections between candidates who possess bureaucratic influence and those who lack comparable access to administrative power. At the national level, the SI-ASN system has recorded a substantial number of alleged neutrality violations during regency and mayoral elections. In South Sulawesi, Bawaslu identified civil service neutrality as a central priority of electoral oversight from the outset of the 2024 local election process.

There is clear from these developments that the bureaucracy is not only an administrative organization; rather, but it is also a political arena that is disputed by the elites of the local community. There is a possibility that the incentives to mobilize bureaucratic staff and resources may grow in areas where election competition is fierce. It is possible for the civil service to become an extension of electoral coalitions and incumbent political networks in areas where bureaucratic institutions are failing to function effectively. When operating under these circumstances, the ethics of the bureaucracy are put to the most direct test.

Indonesian case-study literature supports this interpretation. Research on bureaucratic politicization in the Bandung local election identified practices such as the strategic rotation of civil servants, the distribution of social assistance before election day, the mobilization of professional organizations, and the use of government facilities for electoral purposes. Other studies on

strengthening bureaucratic neutrality in North Sumatra have shown that violations of civil service neutrality are recurrent and cannot be addressed solely through normative appeals or formal declarations.

South Sulawesi is therefore not an isolated case. Rather, it forms part of a broader national pattern in which local executive elections constitute one of the most vulnerable periods for bureaucratic ethics. What distinguishes South Sulawesi is the breadth of variation in electoral competition, which helps demonstrate that the central issue is not simply the number of candidates. The more important question is how political competition is translated into relationships among elected leaders, supporting parties, political networks, and the administrative apparatus.

From the perspective of organizational integrity theory, this pattern is conceptually plausible. The concept of structural integrity explains that bureaucratic neutrality and integrity do not arise spontaneously from the moral character of individual officials. Instead, they are produced through three interconnected layers of governance: legal and institutional protection from political intervention; organizational procedures that ensure accountability and traceability; and a professional culture that enables public officials to exercise discretion responsibly.

Because of the weakness of these three levels, political competition, particularly fierce rivalry, has the potential to increase the informal pressure that bureaucratic organizations are under. On the other hand, electoral rivalry can function as a vehicle of democratic monitoring when it is relatively robust, and it can do so without weakening administrative neutrality. The performance of Soppeng and Bulukumba is more appropriately read within this framework as a sign of their institutional capacity to absorb political pressure, rather than as a mechanical consequence of a particular form of electoral competition. This interpretation is more acceptable since it is more in line with the existing paradigm.

The policy implications are relatively clear. First, subnational governments in South Sulawesi cannot rely on electoral competition alone as a mechanism for improving integrity. Second, reform efforts should focus on the areas directly identified by the KPK: strengthening human resource governance, closing opportunities for bribery and gratuities, expanding the digitalization of public services and electronic procurement, improving complaint mechanisms, limiting opportunities for informal negotiation, and developing follow-up action plans that address systemic weaknesses rather than merely disseminating formal regulations.

Third, civil service neutrality should be treated as a broader governance issue rather than exclusively as an electoral concern. Electoral oversight should therefore be connected to audits of personnel transfers and appointments, civil service reward-and-sanction policies, and the institutional strengthening of internal inspectorates and government internal supervisory bodies. Fourth, highly competitive jurisdictions such as Makassar and Palopo may require stronger institutional safeguards because closely contested elections are likely to generate greater political pressure on bureaucratic structures. These recommendations are inferential and are derived from the combined evidence of the KPK's SPI findings, Bawaslu's SI-ASN framework, and the literature on bureaucratic meritocracy.

At the same time, this study identifies a significant methodological flaw that has ramifications for both academics and policymakers: the public's access to data on subnational integrity continues to be inconsistent. Not all scores at the regency and municipality level are readily available in a format that is standardized and machine-readable, despite the fact that the KPK has given a dashboard for the outcomes of the 2025 SPI and has indicated that institutional performance

categories can be viewed on its official website. Therefore, investigations of this nature that are conducted at the subnational level are required to continue to mix official releases, republications from local governments, and media stories that quote KPK data.

Improved transparency and standardized publication of district-level SPI results would significantly strengthen research on local governance. It would facilitate more systematic comparisons, support the construction of longitudinal datasets, and enable future studies to conduct more robust statistical assessments of the relationship between electoral competition, bureaucratic politicization, and institutional integrity.

Conclusion

The relationship between local political competition and bureaucratic ethics in South Sulawesi is neither linear nor uniform; rather, it is strongly conditioned by the quality of bureaucratic institutions. Electoral competition across the province varies substantially, ranging from single-candidate elections to contests involving four candidate pairs, and from extremely narrow margins of victory to decisive electoral outcomes. However, these variations do not automatically account for differences in local government integrity. Publicly accessible evidence indicates that Soppeng and Bulukumba have achieved or maintained comparatively stronger levels of integrity, whereas Makassar, Palopo, and Maros remain within the vulnerable category. These findings suggest that the implementation of a merit-based civil service system, the protection of civil service neutrality, effective control over personnel transfers and promotions, the strengthening of government internal supervisory institutions, the digitalization of public services, and the cultivation of organizational integrity are more consequential than electoral competitiveness alone.

Theoretically, these findings are consistent with the literature arguing that democracy and political competition can reduce corruption only when the bureaucracy possesses sufficient institutional capacity to support electoral accountability. In politically penetrated bureaucratic settings, intensified competition may instead increase incentives to misuse administrative personnel, public resources, and discretionary authority for electoral purposes. Policy reform in South Sulawesi should therefore extend beyond improvements to electoral procedures. Greater emphasis should be placed on protecting the bureaucracy from political intervention, particularly in human resource management, personnel appointments, public service delivery, and the exercise of administrative discretion.

Future research should construct a more comprehensive district-level panel dataset by integrating annual SPI scores, records of civil service neutrality violations, audit opinions and internal control weaknesses, public service performance indices, and political variables such as party-system fragmentation, incumbency, electoral competitiveness, and election-result disputes. Such data would allow the conditional relationship identified in this article to be tested more rigorously through quantitative methods. Until such evidence becomes available, the most defensible conclusion is that local political competition in South Sulawesi is neither inherently detrimental to bureaucratic ethics nor sufficient to guarantee governmental integrity. The decisive factor is whether the bureaucracy is protected and governed by institutions that are meritocratic, politically neutral, professionally autonomous, and accountable.

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