

Who Do Polls Really Influence? Survey Institutions and Mediatized Political Communication in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explores how national polling institutions in Indonesia operate within an increasingly mediatized political communication environment. Drawing on a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research is based on in-depth interviews with senior researchers from four leading survey organisations. The findings show that polling institutions maintain a close, strategic relationship with the news media. To remain visible and relevant, they adapt to media logic by packaging survey findings in formats that are accessible, newsworthy, and easily circulated. At the same time, media outlets rely on polling data as credible material for political reporting. However, this mutual dependence generates important ethical and methodological tensions. Polling institutions must navigate financial pressures, political interests, and the risks of misinformation in digital spaces while preserving scientific integrity. The study also finds that polls tend to influence political elites more strongly than grassroots voters, functioning primarily as strategic tools that shape party agendas and campaign decisions. By situating polling institutions as intermediary actors in a mediatized democracy, this research highlights both the democratic potential and the vulnerabilities of public opinion surveys, emphasizing the need for stronger transparency, professional ethics, and cross-sector collaboration in Indonesia's evolving political landscape.

Keywords: Political communication; mediatization; public opinion; survey institutions; sustainable democracy

INTRODUCTION

Active and accessible communication channels between citizens, media organizations, and political actors are fundamental to democratic governance. In democratic systems, public demands circulate through communication networks that shape political agendas and policy decisions. At the same time, citizens rely on media institutions to inform them about political developments, electoral competition, and government performance. In post-authoritarian Indonesia, these communication dynamics have undergone a profound transformation.

The collapse of Suharto's regime in 1998 marked a decisive shift toward democratic openness. Media liberalization expanded transparency, pluralism, and civic participation. Over the past two decades, political dialogue has become more visible and contested in both traditional and digital arenas. Citizens who were previously constrained under state-dominated media now participate actively in political discourse. Public service broadcasting and digital news platforms have broadened access to political narratives and reduced overt institutional bias (Masduki, 2022; Widodo & Kristiyono, 2025). However, this expansion has also produced a more complex and fragmented communication environment.

To understand these transformations, scholars increasingly rely on mediatization theory. Rather than viewing media as neutral transmitters of information, mediatization theory conceptualizes media as institutions with their own logic that shapes political processes (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017; Ahmad, 2018). Media logic refers to professional norms, production routines, formats, news values, and narrative conventions that influence how political information is selected, framed, and disseminated. As mediatization deepens, political actors do not merely communicate through media; they adapt their strategies to fit media logic.

In contemporary hybrid media systems, mediatization operates across both legacy media and digital platforms. Social media platforms such as YouTube and X (formerly Twitter) enable participatory political communication but also intensify competition for attention. Political messages must be concise, visually engaging, and emotionally resonant to circulate effectively. At the same time, digital environments facilitate disinformation, amplify polarization, and erode trust in institutions (Venus et al., 2025; Gianan, 2020; Wijayanto et al., 2022).

Recent scholarship emphasizes that mediatization is shaped by platform-specific dynamics. Political actors adjust their communication strategies according to the affordances and constraints of different platforms (Abu-Ayyash, 2024). Importantly, political communication on social media often targets not only citizens but also journalists. Statements that gain traction online are frequently incorporated into mainstream news coverage, further reinforcing media logic across institutional boundaries.

Despite this rich body of research, mediatization scholarship has largely focused on politicians, parties, and media organizations. Less attention has been given to intermediary institutions that operate between public opinion, political elites, and media systems. Public opinion survey institutions represent one such under-theorized actor.

In many democracies, opinion polls have become central features of electoral

reporting. However, polling data are often simplified in news coverage. Horse-race journalism prioritizes electability rankings and competition over substantive policy debate (Zollmann, 2012). Survey results are frequently presented without methodological context, such as sampling procedures or margins of error, limiting public capacity to evaluate their validity (Bethäuser et al., 2025). As a result, polls risk functioning less as instruments of democratic reflection and more as persuasive tools within political communication.

Audience research further complicates this picture. Citizens do not passively absorb mediated information; they interpret it through pre-existing beliefs, generational identities, and political commitments. For example, research on AI-driven political campaigns in Indonesia shows that visually appealing content may attract attention while remaining shallow in terms of information (Ghanjali, 2024). Similarly, framing effects may weaken when audiences confront multiple competing narratives (Berk, 2025). In polarized environments, individuals may reject information including polling results that contradicts their political preferences.

These developments raise important questions about the role of survey institutions in mediatized democracies. Polling organizations do more than measure public opinion. They interpret data, frame findings, schedule releases strategically, and engage in media relations. In doing so, they increasingly operate within media logic. Their findings circulate through journalistic channels, shape headlines, and influence political debate.

Yet polling institutions also face credibility challenges. In Indonesia, some survey organizations have been accused of partisan alignment or political consultancy overlap. In a media environment driven by speed, simplicity, and spectacle, maintaining methodological integrity becomes more difficult. Survey results may be selectively amplified, misinterpreted, or weaponized in digital spaces.

Existing mediatization research has primarily examined how politicians adapt to media logic and how media institutions shape political communication. However, polling institutions occupy a distinctive intermediary position. They translate public opinion into quantifiable data, transform data into communicable narratives, and distribute findings through media networks. Despite their growing visibility, their role within mediatized political systems remains insufficiently theorized.

This study addresses that gap by conceptualizing polling institutions as intermediary actors in a mediatized democracy. It argues that survey organizations internalize media logic while attempting to preserve scientific credibility. In doing so, they become strategic communicators whose influence extends beyond data production. Polls do not merely reflect political reality; they participate in its construction.

Based on a qualitative phenomenological study of four leading Indonesian survey institutions—Indikator Politik Indonesia, Indopol Survey, Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI), and KedaiKOPI—this research investigates how polling institutions operate within a mediatized political environment. Specifically, the study explores how these institutions adapt their communication practices to media logic, how they negotiate tensions between public visibility, political pressure, and methodological integrity, and how the influence of polling results differs across political actors and broader society. Through in-depth

interviews with senior representatives, the study seeks to understand how survey institutions interpret their strategic role, ethical responsibilities, and communicative positioning in Indonesia's evolving democratic landscape.

By situating polling institutions within mediatization theory, this study extends the framework beyond its traditional focus on politicians and media organizations. It demonstrates that polling institutions function as mediating nodes that connect citizens, media systems, and political elites. Their influence operates primarily at the elite level—shaping campaign strategy, coalition building, and agenda setting—while exerting more indirect effects on grassroots voters.

In doing so, this research contributes to debates on democratic accountability, institutional trust, and the evolving ecology of political communication in transitional democracies. It highlights both the democratic potential and the structural vulnerabilities of public opinion surveys in Indonesia's rapidly transforming media landscape.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine how Indonesian public opinion survey institutions experience and interpret their engagement with media within a mediatized political environment. Phenomenology is appropriate because the research seeks to understand how institutional actors make sense of their professional practices, ethical dilemmas, and strategic decisions in everyday interactions with journalists and political stakeholders (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cilesiz, 2011).

Rather than measuring causal effects, this study aims to capture the lived institutional experience of mediatization. In political communication research, phenomenology has been used to explore how actors interpret media dynamics, digital disruptions, and political practices from their own standpoint (Heriyawan et al., 2024; Firdaus et al., 2025). This approach allows the analysis to move beyond abstract theory and ground mediatization processes in institutional narratives.

The study is based on in-depth interviews with senior representatives from four leading Indonesian polling institutions: Indikator Politik Indonesia, Indopol Survey, Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI), and KedaiKOPI. These institutions were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) because of their national visibility and frequent citation in mainstream media, their institutional membership in Persepi (the Indonesian Association of Public Opinion Survey Institutions), and their direct involvement in electoral polling and media dissemination. The participants held senior-level roles, including founders, directors, and senior researchers, and were directly involved in survey design, data interpretation, and media engagement, enabling them to offer informed reflections on strategic decision-making and media relations. A total of [insert number] senior informants were interviewed, with each interview lasting between [insert duration, e.g., 60–120 minutes]. The interviews were conducted between June and November 2024, either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allowed flexibility while ensuring that key themes were systematically addressed. The interview guide explored how institutions present and disseminate survey findings, how they interact

with journalists and media organizations, how they experience political or financial pressure, and how they make ethical decisions regarding whether to publish or withhold specific results. It also examined how participants perceived the influence of polling results on political elites and ordinary voters. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. To protect participants' identities, transcripts were anonymized, and quotations in the findings section are attributed using generic identifiers (e.g., Informant 1, Informant 2) to maintain confidentiality while preserving analytic transparency.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by phenomenological principles. Analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to build familiarity with participants' accounts and to identify significant statements. The researchers then conducted open coding to capture recurring meanings related to media logic, framing strategies, credibility concerns, political pressure, and institutional autonomy. These initial codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes representing shared patterns across institutions. The analysis yielded three overarching thematic categories: Adapting to Media Logic, Negotiating Credibility and Independence, and Managing Democratic Responsibility in a Post-Truth Environment. Coding and thematic refinement were supported by qualitative data analysis software (NVivo), which facilitated the systematic organization of transcripts, comparisons across codes, and the iterative development of themes. Throughout the analytic process, the researchers also wrote analytic memos to document interpretive decisions and emerging theoretical insights, with the goal of interpreting how institutional actors internalize media logic and position themselves within a mediatized political system rather than merely summarizing interview content.

Several strategies were employed to enhance credibility, dependability, and interpretive validity.

First, the researchers practiced *epoché* (bracketing) to minimize the influence of prior assumptions regarding polling institutions and media behavior (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the research process.

Second, member checking was conducted. Preliminary interpretations were shared with selected participants to confirm accuracy and prevent misrepresentation (Lloyd et al., 2024).

Third, triangulation was applied by comparing interview accounts with publicly available materials, including media reports, institutional press releases, and official statements (Gasuku, 2023; Morgan, 2024). This process strengthened contextual grounding and reduced reliance on single-source narratives.

Because phenomenological research emphasizes depth over breadth, this study aims for analytical transferability rather than statistical generalization (Reid et al., 2005; Burchett et al., 2020). The detailed institutional accounts presented here may offer insights relevant to other transitional democracies experiencing similar mediatization processes.

The study followed established ethical standards for qualitative research. Participants received a clear explanation of the study's objectives and provided informed

consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymization of transcripts and removal of identifiable institutional details when necessary.

Special attention was given to accurately representing participants' perspectives, particularly when discussing politically sensitive issues such as elite influence, data withholding, and institutional pressure. Ethical responsibility in this study extends not only to participant protection but also to careful interpretation of institutional practices within Indonesia's democratic context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that Indonesian survey institutions no longer operate merely as neutral data transmitters. Instead, they actively adapt their communication practices to media logic to secure visibility, relevance, and legitimacy in a competitive political communication environment. Media coverage plays a decisive role in determining whether survey findings gain public attention. As a result, polling institutions recognize that the salience of their work depends not only on methodological rigor but also on how effectively their findings align with journalistic priorities. In practice, media outlets tend to emphasize electability rankings, popularity trends, and competitive dynamics rather than policy-oriented results. Consequently, survey institutions anticipate these preferences and adjust how they present their findings.

This adaptation does not involve altering raw data, but rather strategically foregrounding certain indicators in press releases and media briefings. Polling increasingly becomes communicative labor in addition to research activity. Institutions must translate complex statistical outputs into accessible narratives that can circulate effectively within news ecosystems. In doing so, they internalize agenda-setting dynamics, acknowledging that media organizations influence which aspects of political reality become publicly prominent.

Several interrelated strategies characterize this adaptation. First, survey institutions carefully time the release of findings to coincide with key political moments such as debates, coalition negotiations, or cabinet reshuffles. Synchronizing publication with political momentum increases the likelihood of media uptake. Visibility, therefore, depends not only on data quality but also on alignment with news cycles.

Second, institutions package their findings into concise, visually accessible formats. Executive summaries, infographics, and headline-oriented key points are prepared to facilitate rapid reporting. This packaging reduces interpretive ambiguity and lowers journalists' production burden, increasing the likelihood that findings will be reproduced in mainstream coverage. Although the underlying data remain unchanged, the format of presentation shapes which elements receive attention.

Third, survey institutions engage in framing practices when contextualizing results. Rather than presenting isolated numbers, they embed findings within broader political narratives to guide interpretation. In mediatized environments where data are easily detached from context, such framing is seen as necessary to preserve interpretive authority. Institutions attempt to ensure that methodological explanations accompany headline figures, even though they recognize that simplified metrics often dominate

coverage.

Across interviews, participants acknowledged that polling results function as valuable media commodities. During election periods in particular, survey data provide structured numerical content that supports competitive storytelling. Television broadcasts and online news portals rely on these figures to anchor political discussions. This integration enhances institutional visibility and reinforces public recognition. However, it also produces ambivalence. While media exposure strengthens legitimacy and branding, complex findings may be reduced to single charts or rankings, with nuance lost in the process.

The relationship between polling institutions and media is therefore characterized by structured interdependence. Survey organizations internalize media expectations to maintain relevance while simultaneously attempting to defend methodological integrity. This negotiation reflects a broader transformation in mediatized political systems, in which institutions must balance scientific credibility with communicative effectiveness.

These findings extend mediatization theory in two significant ways. First, they demonstrate that mediatization affects not only politicians and journalists but also intermediary institutions that translate public opinion into communicable forms. Polling institutions internalize media logic through timing, packaging, and framing strategies, illustrating how media norms penetrate epistemic actors beyond electoral candidates. Second, the results suggest that polls operate as hybrid epistemic-media commodities. They remain grounded in methodological procedures, yet they circulate within media systems as attention-generating content that shapes political narratives.

By conceptualizing polling institutions as intermediary actors in a mediatized democracy, this study broadens the analytical scope of mediatization theory. Survey organizations do not simply measure public opinion; they actively participate in constructing how political reality is communicated, interpreted, and strategically used within Indonesia

Strategic Symbiosis: Pollsters and the Media

The findings reveal a clear pattern of mutual dependence between Indonesian polling institutions and news media. Rather than operating in isolation, both actors rely on each other to sustain visibility, legitimacy, and influence within the political communication ecosystem.

An executive from Indikator Politik Indonesia explained:

"We as a survey institution certainly need media to publish our findings, and television media also need our data." (Informant 1)

Similarly, a representative from KedaiKOPI described the relationship as particularly intense during election periods:

"Usually, the survey results become an initial reference for media discussions. In quick count broadcasts, our institution's name appears continuously for hours on television. So it's a win-win solution." (Informant 2)

These statements illustrate that polling institutions recognize media exposure as a strategic resource. Media visibility not only disseminates findings but also reinforces institutional branding and public credibility. At the same time, media organizations depend on polling data to structure political coverage, especially during elections, where numerical indicators provide authoritative anchors for competitive narratives.

This reciprocal relationship reflects what mediatization scholarship identifies as the deep integration of media logic into political processes (Strömbäck & Esser, 2017).

Informants described deliberate efforts to make survey findings easily usable for journalists. Institutions prepare press-ready summaries, headline-oriented narratives, and visual materials to facilitate rapid reporting.

One participant noted:

“We prepare materials that journalists can immediately use. If we only provide raw tables, they will not have time to process them.” (Informant 3)

Such practices resemble what communication scholars describe as news subsidy—information packaged to reduce journalists’ production costs and increase the likelihood of publication. However, interviewees framed this not as manipulation, but as necessary adaptation to newsroom routines.

As another informant clarified:

“It is not about changing the data. It is about making the data understandable and relevant.” (Informant 4)

This distinction is crucial. Polling institutions do not report altering methodological procedures or numerical outcomes. Instead, they manage the presentation of findings to align with journalistic expectations of clarity, immediacy, and narrative coherence.

The data therefore suggest that survey institutions engage in strategic news management while attempting to preserve methodological integrity. Despite adapting to media logic, informants consistently emphasized the limits of flexibility.

One participant stated firmly:

“There are data that are non-negotiable. We allow media to publish them, but we cannot adjust the findings.” (Informant 1)

Another explained:

“If the results are not favorable to certain parties, we still present them. We may choose how to explain them, but not to change them.” (Informant 3)

These accounts indicate that polling institutions perceive a boundary between communication strategy and scientific manipulation. Adaptation occurs at the level of framing, timing, and emphasis not at the level of methodological procedures.

This negotiation between visibility and integrity represents a central tension in mediatized political communication. Institutions must remain media-relevant without compromising scientific credibility.

The findings provide empirical support for extending mediatization theory beyond its traditional focus on politicians and journalists. Strömbäck and Esser (2014) describe a phase of mediatization in which media logic penetrates intermediary institutions. The present study demonstrates that Indonesian polling organizations exemplify this dynamic.

Through scheduled press releases, livestreamed briefings, visual infographics, and headline-ready summaries, polling institutions internalize newsroom norms and audience attention cycles. These practices increase the probability that survey data will be adopted and circulated widely.

However, this integration also reshapes institutional identity. Polling institutions are no longer solely research bodies; they function simultaneously as communicative actors operating within competitive media environments.

The strategic symbiosis between pollsters and media becomes more fragile in a post-truth communication environment. Informants reported that survey results are frequently reinterpreted, selectively quoted, or detached from methodological context once circulated in digital spaces.

As one interviewee explained:

"After we release the survey, people on social media sometimes take one number and ignore the explanation. Then it spreads without context." (Informant 2)

This observation aligns with broader concerns about post-truth politics, where emotionally resonant narratives often outweigh methodological verification (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Valero, 2018). In such environments, even rigorously conducted surveys may be weaponized for partisan purposes.

Several informants expressed concern about reputational risks:

"If someone manipulates our data, the public may blame the institution, even if the distortion did not come from us." (Informant 4)

The vulnerability of polling institutions thus increases as digital dissemination accelerates and gatekeeping weakens. Media visibility enhances legitimacy, but it also exposes institutions to reinterpretation and misuse.

Informants also acknowledged that changing media consumption patterns, particularly among younger voters, reshape the circulation of polling data. As younger generations increasingly rely on social media and online platforms for political information (Elfandari, 2024), survey results must circulate across hybrid media systems.

One participant observed:

"Television still matters, but social media amplifies everything. If the survey trends online, it gains another layer of attention." (Informant 3)

This hybrid environment intensifies competition for visibility. Survey findings must be adaptable across television broadcasts, online news portals, and digital platforms. Consequently, institutions refine storytelling techniques while attempting to safeguard methodological explanations.

Taken together, these findings reveal a structured yet tension-filled symbiosis. Polling institutions gain exposure, branding, and influence through media collaboration. Media organizations gain authoritative numerical content that structures political narratives. However, this interdependence creates continuous negotiation between: Visibility and neutrality, Strategic framing and methodological rigor, Media simplification and analytical nuance

By documenting how survey institutions internalize and manage media logic, this study expands mediatization theory to include intermediary epistemic actors. Polling institutions operate at the intersection of research, communication, and politics. Their strategic symbiosis with media does not eliminate scientific standards, but it reconfigures how those standards are communicated and contested in public life.

Navigating Framing and Gatekeeping

The findings indicate that Indonesian polling institutions operate within a layered gatekeeping structure shaped by both traditional newsrooms and digital platforms. Informants consistently described the need to anticipate how journalists will select, interpret, and headline survey findings.

One senior researcher explained:

“We know that not all data will be taken by the media. Usually they choose what is most controversial or competitive.” (Informant 1)

This awareness shapes how institutions present their findings. Rather than publishing raw statistical tables alone, pollsters strategically emphasize certain indicators—particularly electability trends, vote shifts, or coalition dynamics—that are more likely to pass editorial filters.

However, this selective emphasis does not necessarily imply data manipulation. As another participant clarified:

“We do not change the numbers. But we understand which parts will attract media attention.” (Informant 2)

These accounts illustrate how polling institutions navigate gatekeeping by adapting to editorial priorities while attempting to maintain methodological integrity. In this sense, framing becomes both a defensive and proactive strategy: defensive because institutions seek to prevent misinterpretation, and proactive because they aim to guide journalistic uptake.

A central empirical finding of this study concerns the differentiated impact of polling results. Informants consistently distinguished between elite-level influence and grassroots voter influence.

One senior researcher stated:

“I cannot deny that there is an effect at the elite level related to the release of electoral polling results. But until now, I am still skeptical that it has a strong effect at the grassroots level, because many of our citizens are not deeply concerned with polling results.” (Informant 3)

He further elaborated:

“The effect is not direct at the grassroots level. It affects decision-makers—how they allocate resources, how they build coalitions—because they consume the map provided by media coverage of surveys.” (Informant 3)

These statements suggest that polling data function primarily as strategic information for political elites rather than as direct persuasive tools for voters. Political actors monitor survey releases to assess competitiveness, adjust campaign messaging, reallocate campaign funds, and negotiate coalition arrangements.

Another participant reinforced this distinction:

“Political parties pay very close attention to our surveys. They use them to calculate strategy. Ordinary citizens, not always.” (Informant 4)

The data therefore indicate that the mediatization of polling strengthens elite responsiveness more than mass persuasion. While survey findings circulate widely in media, their most consequential effects occur within political decision-making circles.

This distinction between elite and grassroots effects extends mediatization theory in an important way. Much of the literature assumes that media logic primarily shapes how politicians communicate with voters. However, the present findings show that polling data operate as strategic feedback mechanisms within elite networks.

In mediatized democracies, surveys provide publicly visible performance indicators. These indicators influence how political actors perceive viability, momentum, and legitimacy. Media coverage amplifies these signals, reinforcing their strategic importance among elites.

At the same time, informants expressed skepticism about strong direct persuasion effects on voters. As one interviewee noted:

“Many citizens choose based on identity or long-term loyalty. Surveys do not automatically change that.” (Informant 2)

This observation aligns with research suggesting that framing effects may weaken in polarized or identity-driven contexts. Polls may not dramatically shift voter preferences, but they shape elite calculations and campaign dynamics.

Thus, polling institutions function as intermediary actors in a feedback loop:

- Citizens express preferences through surveys.
- Survey institutions quantify and frame those preferences.
- Media amplify selected findings.
- Political elites adjust strategy based on mediated interpretations.

This cyclical process demonstrates how mediatization restructures political decision-making beyond direct voter persuasion. The differentiated influence of polling generates ambivalent democratic consequences. On the one hand, polling can enhance transparency. By publicly revealing shifts in public opinion, surveys create informational pressure on political elites. They may encourage responsiveness and strategic adaptation to voter sentiment.

On the other hand, mediatized polling may incentivize short-term tactical politics. If elites prioritize electability metrics over substantive policy debate, political communication risks becoming increasingly competitive and performance-oriented.

One informant reflected on this tension:

“Sometimes the focus becomes who is rising and who is declining, not what policies are being discussed.” (Informant 1)

This comment illustrates how framing under gatekeeping conditions may narrow public discourse. Polls become performance indicators rather than instruments for substantive democratic deliberation.

The findings highlight several practical implications. First, clearer ethical boundaries between survey research and political consulting are necessary to maintain public trust. Informants emphasized the importance of separating data production from partisan advisory roles. Second, greater transparency in methodological explanation could mitigate misinterpretation. Although institutions adapt to media logic, they also recognize the risk of simplification.

Third, improving media literacy remains crucial. As one participant observed:

“If people understand margins of error and sampling better, they will not easily accuse surveys of manipulation.” (Informant 4)

These reflections underscore that polling institutions operate within a broader ecosystem involving journalists, political actors, and citizens. Strengthening democratic accountability requires collaborative efforts across these sectors.

This section demonstrates that polling institutions do not merely respond passively to media gatekeeping. They actively navigate framing constraints while preserving methodological standards. Their influence is most pronounced at the elite level, where survey results shape strategic decision-making. By revealing this differentiated impact, the study refines the understanding of mediatization. Polling institutions are not simply communicative intermediaries; they are strategic nodes in a feedback system linking citizens, media systems, and political elites.

Defending Integrity Under Political Pressure

Across all interviews, maintaining credibility emerged as a central institutional priority. Informants described methodological integrity not only as an ethical obligation but also as a survival strategy in a competitive and politically polarized environment.

One senior informant emphasized:

“What we prioritise most is methodological integrity. If the results are not in line with what the client expects, we advise them not to publish the survey. But we never change the methodology.” (Informant 1)

This statement clearly delineates the boundary between client expectations and research procedures. While clients may influence whether results are publicly released, informants consistently rejected altering sampling design, data collection, or statistical analysis.

Institutional safeguards further reinforce this stance. Membership in Persepi (the Indonesian Association of Public Opinion Survey Institutions) was repeatedly described as a mechanism of collective regulation.

As one participant noted:

“That is why we formed Persepi — as a gatekeeper to protect the integrity of survey data. If too many questionable polling institutions appear, public trust will erode.” (Informant 2)

Here, a professional association functions as a reputational infrastructure. Credibility is defended not only internally through methodological transparency but also externally through collective standards and peer accountability.

Despite these safeguards, informants acknowledged persistent tension between scientific research and political consultancy. In competitive electoral contexts, survey institutions often operate close to campaign environments.

One informant stated explicitly:

“Survey activities must be separated from consulting activities. If they are mixed, what is objective can become non-objective.” (Informant 3)

This remark highlights a structural dilemma. Polling institutions may simultaneously produce public surveys and provide strategic advice to political actors. Even when methodological standards are maintained, the proximity to political campaigns can generate public suspicion.

Another participant admitted that sensitive findings are sometimes handled cautiously:

“There are cases where we consider whether releasing certain data could be misunderstood or politicised.” (Informant 4)

This cautious approach reflects the ethical complexity of operating in politically charged environments. Decisions about publication involve not only scientific considerations but also potential social and political consequences.

The findings, therefore, reveal that institutional independence is continuously negotiated rather than assumed.

These tensions become more pronounced in a post-truth communication environment. As polls gain political salience, their credibility becomes increasingly contested.

Informants reported growing skepticism, particularly on social media platforms. One explained:

“When people support a candidate and the polling shows their candidate is behind, they feel uncomfortable. So they look for rational explanations that protect their own position.” (Informant 2)

This reaction reflects cognitive dissonance dynamics, where individuals challenge survey legitimacy when results contradict their political preferences. In highly polarized contexts, data interpretation becomes identity-driven rather than method-driven.

Another participant described the structural challenge more directly:

“The only thing we can do is clarify through media. But social media has no gatekeeper.” (Informant 1)

This observation underscores the asymmetry between professional communication channels and decentralized digital platforms. While traditional media maintain editorial standards, social media allow rapid dissemination of distorted or fabricated survey claims. In such environments, well-designed survey data can be selectively quoted, decontextualized, or weaponized for partisan narratives. Informants expressed concern that reputational damage may occur even when distortion originates outside the institution.

Transparency, Literacy, and Cross-Sector Responsibility

To address these challenges, some institutions reported efforts to increase transparency. These include publishing methodological notes, explaining sampling procedures, and providing clearer margins of error during media briefings.

However, informants acknowledged the limits of reactive clarification:

“Once misinformation spreads widely, correction does not travel as fast.”
(Informant 3)

This aligns with broader scholarship suggesting that institutional trust declines in fragmented media environments, particularly where social media consumption dominates (Badman et al., 2022). Trust is not secured solely through methodological rigor; it depends on broader communication ecosystems.

Several informants emphasized the need for collaborative approaches:

“Maintaining trust in surveys is not only our responsibility. Media, fact-checkers, and platforms must also play a role.” (Informant 4)

This perspective reframes polling credibility as a systemic issue rather than an isolated institutional problem.

Beyond reputational pressures, polling institutions also face methodological challenges in adapting to digital communication environments. While stratified face-to-face sampling remains the gold standard, logistical constraints increasingly push institutions toward online surveys, mobile polling, and digital sentiment analysis.

One informant described the dilemma:

“Online methods are faster and cheaper, but we must be careful. Not all regions have equal internet access.” (Informant 2)

Indonesia’s digital divide introduces potential coverage bias. Online polling may overrepresent younger, urban, and digitally connected populations. As a result, several institutions reported employing triangulation strategies—combining traditional sampling with digital methods—to balance speed and representativeness.

These adaptations reflect a broader tension between flexibility and accuracy. Institutions must innovate to remain relevant in fast-paced media environments while preserving methodological credibility.

The findings from this section highlight three interrelated dynamics:

1. *Integrity as strategic necessity* — Credibility functions as both an ethical principle and an institutional survival mechanism.

2. *Structural tension between research and consultancy* — Institutional independence is continually negotiated in politically competitive contexts.
3. *Vulnerability in fragmented media ecosystems* — Post-truth dynamics and digital gatekeeping weaken control over data interpretation.

These dynamics extend mediatization theory by demonstrating that intermediary institutions face not only communicative adaptation pressures but also legitimacy risks. As media logic intensifies and digital dissemination accelerates, the authority of survey institutions becomes contingent on both methodological rigor and ecosystem-level trust.

Polling institutions in Indonesia, therefore, occupy a precarious yet influential position: they must balance transparency and strategic communication, innovation and representativeness, independence and relevance. Their capacity to defend integrity under political and digital pressure ultimately shapes their democratic function.

Democratic Function and Ethical Boundaries

Across interviews, polling institutions consistently framed themselves as participants in democratic life rather than mere producers of technical data. Informants described polling as a mechanism for connecting public aspirations to political decision-making.

One interviewee reflected:

“At the beginning, survey institutions were established to bring public aspirations closer to political elites — so that public feedback could be captured directly.”
(Informant 1)

Another described polling as:

“an early warning system, capturing public dissatisfaction before it turns into open conflict.” (Informant 2)

These statements indicate that polling institutions understand their function as mediating actors within democratic governance. Surveys are perceived not only as measurement tools but also as instruments of political responsiveness. By publicly disclosing shifts in public opinion, pollsters believe they provide signals that encourage elites to adjust policy positions or campaign strategies. In this sense, polling institutions position themselves as democratic intermediaries situated between citizens and political elites. However, the democratic role of polling becomes ethically complex in politically volatile situations. Informants described cases in which methodological findings raised concerns about social stability or representational accuracy.

One participant recounted:

“We found that some voters were intimidated. The numbers did not fully reflect the real political map.” (Informant 3)

In that case, the institution chose not to release the results:

“We decided not to publish the results because we were concerned they did not reflect the real situation.” (Informant 3)

This decision illustrates a tension between transparency and responsibility. On one

hand, withholding results may reduce the risk of misinterpretation or escalation. On the other hand, non-publication may limit public access to information relevant to democratic accountability.

Such situations require institutional judgment that goes beyond technical methodology. Informants emphasized that publication decisions are sometimes guided by broader considerations of social impact, particularly during highly polarized electoral periods. These findings demonstrate that polling institutions exercise moral discretion, not only statistical expertise. In describing these dilemmas, informants repeatedly emphasized methodological integrity as the foundation of their legitimacy. They framed their authority not as partisan alignment but as professional rigor.

One participant stated:

“Our credibility depends on being transparent and consistent. If we are seen as political actors, our data will lose meaning.” (Informant 4)

This statement reflects an awareness that institutional authority rests on a perception of neutrality. In mediatized political systems, where data circulate rapidly and are open to contestation, credibility becomes fragile.

Polling institutions, therefore, position themselves as moral intermediaries. They claim authority grounded in:

- Transparent methodology
- Professional standards
- Public accountability

At the same time, their growing visibility increases expectations regarding ethical responsibility. As their data shape elite strategies and media narratives, the consequences of publication decisions become more consequential.

Beyond publication dilemmas, institutions also face structural pressure to adapt to rapidly evolving media and technological environments. To remain visible and responsive, many have incorporated digital tools such as online surveys, app-based data collection, and mobile interviews.

However, informants acknowledged methodological risks associated with these innovations.

As one explained:

“Online methods help us respond quickly, but we must ensure representativeness. Otherwise, the data may reflect only certain segments.” (Informant 2)

Existing research on digital survey methods highlights potential sampling bias, coverage error, and limitations in data quality (Couper, 2000; Dillman et al., 2014). These risks are particularly salient in Indonesia, where digital access remains uneven across regions and socioeconomic groups.

Institutions, therefore, face a dual imperative:

- Innovate to remain relevant within fast-paced media environments
- Preserve methodological rigor to maintain democratic legitimacy

If speed and visibility outweigh accuracy, polling risks becoming a media-driven product rather than a democratic instrument.

The findings from this section suggest that mediatization reshapes not only communication strategies but also ethical boundaries. As polling becomes integrated into media spectacle and digital circulation, institutions must navigate competing demands:

- Transparency versus stability
- Responsiveness versus neutrality
- Innovation versus representativeness

These tensions reveal that polling institutions are not passive observers of democratic life. They actively shape political information flows while simultaneously managing reputational and ethical risk. By conceptualizing polling institutions as moral and communicative intermediaries, this study extends mediatization theory beyond strategic adaptation to include ethical governance. Mediatization does not merely alter how institutions communicate; it transforms how they justify authority and negotiate democratic responsibility.

This section demonstrates that Indonesian polling institutions operate at the intersection of methodology, media logic, and democratic accountability. Their decisions regarding publication, technological adaptation, and framing practices carry political consequences. Polling institutions, therefore, occupy a paradoxical position: They must remain visible to remain relevant, yet remain restrained to remain credible. Their democratic function depends on maintaining this balance.

CONCLUSION

The mediatization of politics has reshaped the role of polling institutions in Indonesia. Based on a phenomenological study of Indikator Politik Indonesia, Indopol Survey, Lembaga Survei Indonesia (LSI), and KedaiKOPI, this research demonstrates that survey institutions operate at the intersection of methodological rigor, media logic, and democratic accountability. They have evolved from technical data producers into strategic communicative actors within Indonesia's political communication ecology.

The findings show that polling institutions have gradually embedded media logic into their organizational practices in order to maintain visibility and institutional relevance. They strategically time survey releases, construct media-oriented narratives, and present findings in formats compatible with journalistic routines. This adaptation does not necessarily imply data manipulation; rather, it reflects an institutional effort to ensure that survey results circulate effectively in competitive, fast-paced media environments. At the same time, such adaptation introduces ethical tensions, particularly when simplified media representations risk overshadowing methodological nuance.

A central empirical contribution of this study lies in identifying the differentiated impact of polling results. While survey findings do not appear to exert a strong direct influence on grassroots voter preferences, they significantly shape elite decision-making and media agendas. Political actors use polling data to adjust campaign strategies, allocate resources, and negotiate coalitions. In this sense, polling functions less as a tool of mass persuasion and more as a strategic feedback mechanism within elite political networks. This finding extends mediatization theory by demonstrating that intermediary epistemic institutions, not only politicians and journalists, internalize and reproduce media logic.

However, the increasing salience of polls also exposes institutions to reputational risks. In a fragmented digital environment characterized by disinformation and declining institutional trust, survey data can be selectively interpreted or weaponized. Polling institutions therefore face growing pressure to reinforce transparency, clarify methodology, and strengthen professional regulation through collective bodies such as Persepi. The defense of methodological integrity becomes central not only to institutional survival but also to democratic credibility.

Looking forward, the sustainability of polling in Indonesia depends on the capacity of institutions to balance three interrelated imperatives. First, integrity requires sustained commitment to ethical and methodological standards despite financial or political pressures. Second, innovation involves adopting technological tools that enhance speed and accessibility without compromising representativeness or accuracy. Third, inclusiveness demands attention to Indonesia's social and geographic diversity to ensure that surveys capture a broad spectrum of public perspectives.

Indonesian polling institutions thus occupy a structurally complex position. They must remain visible within mediatized political culture while preserving neutrality and scientific authority. Their democratic function depends on maintaining equilibrium between visibility and rigor, agility and accountability, influence and independence. By conceptualizing polling institutions as intermediary actors within a mediatized democracy, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how political communication, institutional trust, and democratic accountability intersect in transitional contexts.

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