

From Disaster Response to the Political Stage: Disasters as Arenas for the Reproduction of Power Ahead of Elections

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Keyword:</p> <p>Disaster; Political trust; Political contestation; Public perception; Electoral preferences</p>	<p>Disasters in Indonesia not only claim victims and damage infrastructure, but also have the potential to become a stage for the reproduction of power in the lead-up to elections. This study aims to analyze how post-disaster governance operates amid political contestation and how government actors and politicians frame policy responses in the public sphere. It also examines the dynamics of contestation that emerge during the response and recovery process and their impact on the configuration of legitimacy and political support. This research uses a qualitative case study design, based on limited observation and documentation of policies, official reports, and media coverage related to natural disasters in Indonesia. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 Plus. The main findings of this study indicate that post-disaster governance functions not only as an administrative mechanism for physical and social recovery but also as a political arena that influences legitimacy and the configuration of power in the lead-up to elections. Policy responses through bureaucratic coordination, aid distribution, and public communication are both produced and represented as symbols of performance and leadership, thus opening up space for practices of credit claiming, blame shifting, and the politicization of aid. Public perceptions of the speed, transparency, and fairness of distribution have also been shown to play a central role in shaping political trust and potential electoral preferences. In conclusion, disasters are crucial moments that can strengthen or weaken institutional legitimacy. In this context, post-disaster governance serves a dual function. First, it serves as a social and administrative recovery mechanism to address the physical impacts and community needs. Second, it serves as a political arena where legitimacy and public trust are formed, negotiated, and reproduced in the lead-up to elections.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Disasters not only bring humanitarian and administrative consequences but also reconfigure power relations, particularly in the lead-up to elections (Balbuena et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2023; Kondoh & Miyazaki, 2024). The high frequency of hydrometeorological disasters and the complexity of local governance in Indonesia make disaster response an arena with broad political implications (Hasfi et al., 2021; Saputra et al., 2025; Wahyuni et al., 2023). In crises, government and political actions, whether in the form of aid distribution, recovery policy formulation, or public communication, are not entirely technocratic but operate within a framework of accountability and electoral considerations (Heersink et al., 2022; Kaplan et al., 2025; Klomp, 2020; Kondoh & Miyazaki, 2024). A rapid, transparent, and coordinated response

has the potential to strengthen legitimacy and increase public political trust, while delays, weak coordination, or the perception of politicization of aid can lead to a decline in public trust (Eisenstadt et al., 2026; Kaim & Kubbe, 2025). Thus, the disaster response and recovery phase can become a space for political contestation, where actors seek to maintain or expand their power base. This situation suggests that disaster governance, particularly in the lead-up to elections, should be understood not only as a risk management issue but also as a political process that directly shapes the dynamics of legitimacy, accountability, and public trust in government institutions.

Several hydrometeorological disasters in Indonesia, particularly floods that have hit various urban areas and river basins, demonstrate how crises are not only an emergency response issue but also enter the realm of public and political debate (Permana, 2025; Widiati, 2019). The high intensity of these events has prompted regional and central governments to take steps to accelerate recovery, from budget reallocation to mobilizing personnel and volunteers (Ariska et al., 2026; Hendrayanto, 2025; Humairah & Arliansyah, 2026; Wibowo et al., 2024). However, amid increasing public attention and the approaching electoral season, these responses have also been accompanied by competing narratives among political actors over policy effectiveness, institutional responsibility, and claims of successful management (Redhani et al., 2025; Sukartini et al., 2023; Wiseso et al., 2020). Media coverage, official visits to affected locations, and the symbolic delivery of aid are all part of the dynamics that demonstrate the link between disaster governance and political calculations (Acuña-Duarte & Salazar, 2021; Heersink et al., 2017). This situation demonstrates that disaster cases can be understood as empirical contexts that illuminate how mitigation and recovery policies can influence public perception and reshape levels of political trust in politicians and government institutions.

Other literature shows that disasters often serve as critical moments, opening up opportunities for policy change and rearticulation of political legitimacy (Baharuddin, Qodir, et al., 2022; Baharuddin, Sairin, et al., 2022; Pashentsev & Kolotaev, 2025; Utami et al., 2022). The effectiveness of a government's response is determined by coordination capacity, leadership clarity, and consistent public communication (Abu Bakar & Mohamad, 2023; Karinda & Baharuddin, 2024; Knox et al., 2025; Nurkaidah et al., 2024). Previous studies also emphasize that public perceptions of government competence and integrity in emergencies are strongly correlated with levels of political trust (Baharuddin et al., 2021; Baharuddin, Jubba, et al., 2022). Performance legitimacy theory holds that public support tends to increase when the government demonstrates responsive, solution-oriented performance, especially in crises that directly affect citizens' lives. Conversely, coordination failures, unclear aid distribution, and conflict among actors can weaken institutional legitimacy and strengthen skepticism toward political elites (Dashkovska et al., 2025; Hakim et al., 2025; Kutlay & Öniş, 2024).

On the other hand, studies on disaster politics and electoralism show that crises can become arenas for symbolic and material contestation. Through mechanisms of credit claiming and blame avoidance, politicians attempt to frame policy responses as evidence of leadership capacity or, conversely, shift responsibility to other actors when failures occur (Partheymüller et al., 2025; Pereira et al., 2025; Tutan, 2025). Other studies also explain that public experiences with recovery policies can shape long-term political attitudes, including levels of participation and electoral preferences (Ashworth et al., 2018; Visconti, 2022). In this context, disasters not only trigger emergency policies but also shape broader political dynamics by configuring support and relations between the state and citizens. Therefore, understanding post-disaster dynamics leading up to elections requires an analysis that integrates institutional dimensions, political communication, and public perceptions of accountability and fairness in resource distribution.

Although various studies have addressed crisis governance, performance legitimacy, and electoral political dynamics separately, there are still limitations in integrating all three simultaneously in the context of disasters leading up to elections in Indonesia. Most previous research tends to position disasters solely as managerial and public policy issues, or conversely, to view them from an electoral political perspective without deeply examining how post-disaster policy experiences shape public political trust. Furthermore, empirical studies specifically examining disasters as actual and contextual political moments are still relatively limited.

Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its attempt to connect post-disaster governance, political actor strategies, and the dynamics of public trust within a unified analytical framework, thus explaining how policy responses impact not only physical and administrative recovery but also the reproduction of legitimacy and the configuration of political support leading up to elections.

The research question is how post-disaster governance operates in the context of elections and to what extent these dynamics influence the configuration of power and public political trust. More specifically, this research asks three main questions: first, how are post-disaster policy responses designed and implemented by the government, and how politicians frame them in the public sphere; Second, how the dynamics of political contestation emerge in the disaster management and recovery process leading up to the election; and third, how public experiences and perceptions of post-disaster policies influence the level of political trust in government institutions and actors. The significance of this research lies in its contribution to integrating studies of crisis governance and electoral politics into a comprehensive analytical framework, while providing an empirical understanding of how post-disaster policies not only impact social and administrative recovery but also shape legitimacy, accountability, and relations between the state and citizens in the context of local democracy in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative case study approach to deeply understand the dynamics of post-disaster governance and its relationship to political contestation leading up to the election. This approach was chosen because it can explain the processes, interactions, and construction of meaning that develop among government and political actors in crises. The research focuses not only on policy outcomes but also on how these policies are formulated, communicated, and perceived in the public sphere. Thus, the analysis focuses on the institutional dimensions, coordination practices, and political narratives that accompany the disaster management and recovery process. A qualitative approach allows for a contextual, in-depth exploration of complex, politically charged phenomena.

Data collection was conducted through observation and documentation. Observations in this study were limited because not all disaster management and recovery processes were directly accessible to the researcher. Therefore, observations focused on specific activities and moments relevant to the research objectives and supported by available documentary data. Meanwhile, documentation techniques were employed by collecting and analyzing official documents, including regional policies and regulations, disaster management evaluation reports, government press releases, political speeches or statements, and media coverage. These documents were analyzed to understand the formal policy framework, the construction of public narratives, and the representation of accountability presented to the public.

The data analysis process was conducted using NVivo 12 Plus software in a systematic, step-by-step manner. The first stage was data preparation, which involved transcribing observation notes and organizing all documents into a digital format before importing them into NVivo. The second stage was open coding, in which researchers identified units of meaning from the text and labeled initial codes such as policy response, cross-agency coordination, political framing, legitimacy, and public trust. The third stage was axial coding, which grouped initial codes into broader categories and analyzed relationships within and across categories, such as the relationship between political communication strategies and perceptions of accountability. At this stage, NVivo's node, hierarchy, and query features were used to explore emerging themes and their interconnections. The fourth stage was selective coding, which involved constructing a conceptual narrative that integrated key categories into an analytical framework to explain how post-disaster governance intersects with the political dynamics leading up to the election.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Post-Disaster Policy Responses and Political Framing in the Public Sphere

Research shows that post-disaster policy responses were designed through mechanisms to accelerate coordination across regional agencies, reallocate budgets, and prioritize infrastructure recovery and social assistance (Ashworth et al., 2018; Delfiyanti & Magdariza, 2021; Frinaldi, 2025). Administratively, these measures reflect efforts to maintain the stability of public services and accelerate the rehabilitation of affected areas. However, in practice, the policy process did not take place entirely within a technocratic framework.

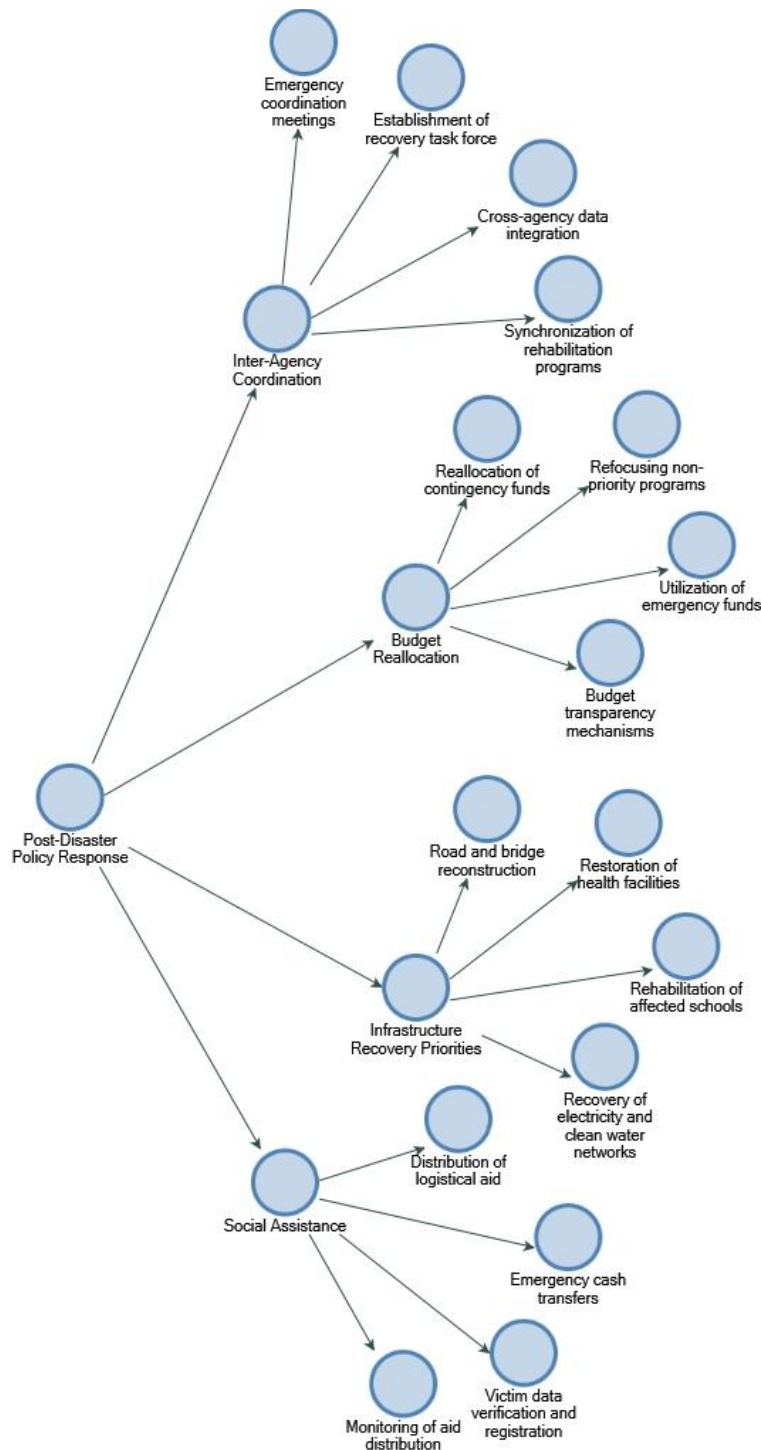


Figure 1. Post-Disaster Policy Response

Source: Processed by Researchers with Nvivo 12 Plus, 2025

Figure 1 depicts a policy architecture that appears administratively systematic and rational but, in practice, is never entirely free of political dimensions. Regarding coordination across regional agencies, emergency coordination meetings, and the formation of recovery teams, these reflect institutional efforts to respond to crises quickly and in a structured manner. Normatively, this mechanism aims to reduce bureaucratic fragmentation and expedite decision-making. However, the effectiveness of coordination depends heavily on institutional capacity and leadership quality. Coordination often stops at the procedural level, while data integration between agencies and synchronization of rehabilitation programs still face sectoral obstacles and institutional egos. Therefore, the success of coordination cannot be measured solely by the frequency of meetings, but rather by the extent to which policy integration is actually realized in practice.

The budget reallocation dimension demonstrates the flexibility of public financial governance in emergencies. The shifting of contingency funds and the refocusing of non-priority programs serve as indicators of fiscal adaptation to urgent needs. However, this flexibility also creates problematic opportunities, particularly when oversight mechanisms are not functioning optimally (Ketners, 2024; Seehaus & Peráček, 2024). The use of emergency funds is often carried out through expedited procedures, which can create a challenge for weak accountability (Dada et al., 2022). While budget transparency is often touted as a key principle, its implementation is largely determined by political commitment and public oversight. Without a strong oversight system, budget reallocation risks becoming an arena for compromised interests or even opportunistic practices that obscure humanitarian objectives.

Regarding infrastructure recovery priorities, rebuilding roads, bridges, health facilities, and schools serves as a concrete symbol of the state's presence (Adamy, 2021; Hastuti et al., 2024; Salam et al., 2025). Physical infrastructure has high visibility and is easily communicated as a measure of government performance. However, the prioritization process is not always neutral. Areas with strategic economic value or particular political significance tend to receive more immediate attention than remote areas. Restoring electricity and clean water networks is crucial for socio-economic sustainability, but the distribution of recovery resources often reflects pre-existing spatial inequalities. Therefore, post-disaster infrastructure policies need to be examined from the perspective of distributive justice rather than simply technical efficiency.

The social assistance dimension presents a protective image of the state in crises. The distribution of logistical aid and emergency cash assistance directly addresses the basic needs of affected communities. However, the victim verification and data collection process is often problematic (Ciptawaty et al., 2025; Susantyo et al., 2023; Tanti et al., 2022). Data inaccuracy, limited access to information, or intervention by vested interests can lead to social exclusion and an inequitable distribution of resources. While aid distribution monitoring mechanisms are designed to ensure accuracy, limited institutional capacity often reduces their effectiveness. Therefore, evaluations of social assistance focus not only on the speed of distribution but also on aspects of inclusivity, transparency, and community participation.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that post-disaster policy responses are not merely administrative practices but also spheres of political meaning production. Coordination, budget reallocation, infrastructure restoration, and social assistance serve dual functions as instruments of crisis management and representations of leadership capacity. Technocratic actions are often communicated symbolically to build an image of responsiveness and concern. Thus, the line between bureaucratic rationality and political legitimacy strategies becomes increasingly blurred in the context of disasters.

As a reflective critique, the success of post-disaster policy responses should not be judged solely on procedural compliance or visible physical achievements. Coordination must generate real integration, budget reallocation must ensure accountability, infrastructure recovery must consider social justice, and social assistance must ensure inclusiveness. Without these dimensions, policy responses risk becoming mere administrative performativity, symbolically powerful but structurally weak. Therefore, a critical analytical approach is needed to assess whether post-disaster policies truly strengthen community resilience or merely strengthen the legitimacy of power in the short term.

After outlining the administrative dimensions of post-disaster policy responses, the discussion then turns to how these policies are interpreted and constructed in the public sphere.

Not all government actions cease to be technocratic practices, as every policy is also produced, represented, and negotiated through political narratives (Alnizar & Manshur, 2022; Hyndman, 2009). Therefore, this section is crucial for understanding how disaster responses transform into discourses of legitimacy and leadership image.

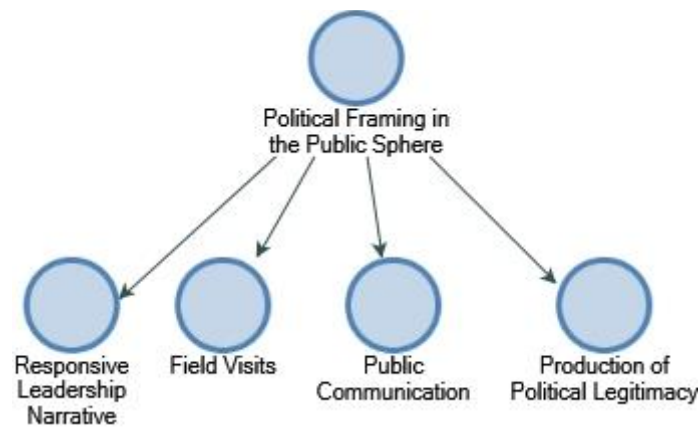


Figure 2. Political Framing in the Public Sphere

Source: Processed by Researchers with Nvivo 12 Plus, 2025

Responsive leadership narratives demonstrate that policy responses are not merely presented as administrative actions but are also constructed through language and symbols. Official statements by regional heads serve as a primary instrument in building public perceptions of the government’s decisiveness and speed. The emphasis on rapid response is often formulated through diction that emphasizes urgency, commitment, and control of the situation. However, this narrative does not always reflect the complexity of the situation. In many cases, responsive language serves as a rhetorical device to quell initial criticism, even when policy implementation continues to face various structural obstacles.

Claims of policy effectiveness become central to leadership framing. Governments tend to present quantitative indicators, such as the amount of aid distributed, kilometers of roads repaired, or houses rehabilitated, as evidence of success. While such data is important, reducing performance to numbers often ignores the dimensions of quality and sustainability. On the other hand, expressions of empathy for victims strengthen the emotional dimension of leadership. Language that conveys closeness and concern serves to build moral legitimacy. However, symbolic empathy without policies sensitive to long-term needs risks becoming mere political performativity.

In terms of field visits, they become a powerful visual practice in shaping public opinion. The presence of leaders at disaster-affected locations creates a sense of direct state presence. Media coverage of these visits extends the symbolic reach of government action. However, field visits are often designed as curated events, with specific points chosen to showcase success or solidarity. This situation raises questions about the extent to which these interactions are substantive or merely representational. Direct interaction with affected communities can strengthen accountability, especially when victims’ aspirations are acted upon. However, in practice, these interactions often take place in a ceremonial format. Symbolic aid deliveries, such as handing over logistical packages in front of cameras, have high communication power, but do not necessarily reflect equitable aid distribution. Publicizing visits through social media further emphasizes the personalized dimension of leadership, where the leader’s figure becomes the center of the narrative. At the same time, the collective work of the bureaucracy is less visible.

The public communication dimension demonstrates how press conferences and official government broadcasts serve as channels for producing meaning. Through structured communication, the government attempts to control the flow of information and minimize speculation. However, this narrative control can also oversimplify reality. When communication focuses more on maintaining image than on creating space for critical evaluation, substantive transparency can be reduced to procedural transparency. Narratives on social media and the use of solidarity campaign hashtags expand the framing space into the digital realm. Social media

allows government messages to spread quickly and reach a wider audience. However, the dynamics of algorithms also encourage emotional and symbolic messages to dominate over in-depth policy discourse. Solidarity built through hashtags can foster a sense of togetherness, but it also risks becoming a fleeting trend that fades without any lasting structural impact.

In the production of political legitimacy, it becomes the cornerstone of the overall framing. Improving the leadership’s image and strengthening public trust are expected consequences of responsive narratives and intensive communication. In the context of electoral politics, disaster response can help consolidate political support. However, the legitimacy built through crisis momentum tends to be contingent, dependent on consistent performance after the emergency phase has passed. Critically, political framing in the public sphere demonstrates that disasters are not only a domain of risk management but also a site of symbolic competition (Alnizar & Manshur, 2022; Hyndman, 2009). An effective response can indeed legitimately strengthen legitimacy, but when symbolism dominates over substance, the risk of perception manipulation increases. Therefore, framing analysis needs to consider the balance between strategic communication and a commitment to transparency and policy fairness. Thus, the production of political legitimacy should be rooted in actual performance and the sustainability of recovery, not solely in the intensity of public exposure.

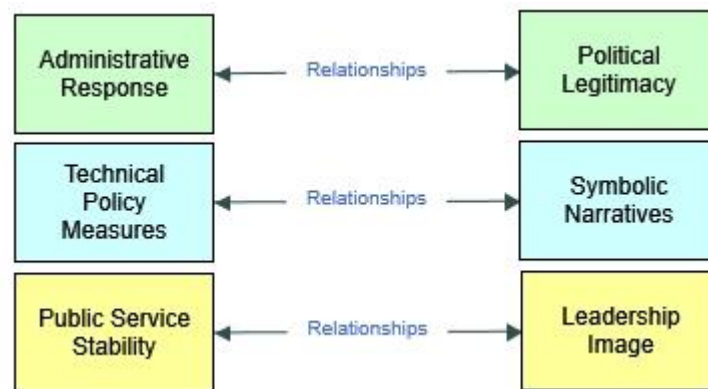


Figure 3. Thematic Relationships in Post-Disaster Governance

Source: Processed by Researchers with Nvivo 12 Plus, 2025

Figure 3 represents the dialectical relationship between the administrative and political dimensions of post-disaster governance. The relationship between *administrative response* and *political legitimacy* demonstrates that every act of coordination, budget reallocation, and accelerated rehabilitation serves not only as a managerial mechanism but also as a source of legitimacy. When an administrative response is perceived as swift and organized, it reinforces perceptions of state capacity. However, the resulting legitimacy is not always based solely on substantive effectiveness, but also on how the response is communicated and perceived by the public. Thus, this relationship is reciprocal: administrative performance can generate legitimacy, while the need to maintain legitimacy can influence the pattern of the administrative response.

The second relationship, between *technical policy measures* and *symbolic narratives*, emphasizes that technical policies never exist in a neutral space. Every technocratic step, such as rebuilding infrastructure or distributing cash assistance, is often packaged in a symbolic narrative that emphasizes leadership concern, speed, and decisiveness. On the one hand, symbolization helps simplify complex policies for public understanding. However, symbolic narratives have the potential to shift the focus from evidence-based policy evaluation to image-building. This relationship demonstrates how technical policies can be reproduced as political representations, thus blurring the line between substance and symbol

The relationship between *public service stability* and *leadership image* also demonstrates a non-linear dynamic. The stability of public services, such as electricity restoration, clean water, and healthcare, is an objective indicator of recovery success. However, these achievements are often capitalized on to construct an image of effective leadership. In this context, the sustainability of public services serves as a material foundation for building a political reputation. However, if service stability is uneven or temporary, the leadership image risks losing legitimacy in the long

term. This means that this relationship is highly dependent on the consistency between the reality of services and their public representation.

Overall, this study demonstrates that post-disaster governance is a space of interaction between bureaucratic rationality and political calculation. These thematic relationships demonstrate not merely conceptual connections but patterns of interdependence that shape policy dynamics. This approach enriches the analysis by positioning policy as a simultaneous process: both administrative and symbolic. Therefore, understanding these thematic relationships is crucial for assessing whether post-disaster policies truly strengthen institutional resilience and public trust, or whether they are more dominantly instruments for the reproduction of political legitimacy.

Dynamics of Political Contestation in the Response and Recovery Process

Research findings indicate that the disaster management and recovery phase has become a space for contestation between political actors, particularly in the context of the lead-up to elections. This contestation emerges through differing narratives regarding the effectiveness of the response, claims of success of aid programs, and the attribution of responsibility for delays or distribution constraints. Analysis of documents and news reports reveals practices of credit claiming and blame shifting that reinforce the political dimension of crisis governance. Furthermore, aid distribution and the symbolic presence of officials at affected locations serve as a strategy for political representation in public. These dynamics demonstrate that post-disaster policy is not only an arena for bureaucratic coordination but also a site of symbolic competition to maintain and expand political support. Table 1 summarizes the dynamics of political contestation in the disaster management and recovery process:

Table 1. Dynamics of Political Contestation in Post-Disaster Management and Recovery

Dimension of Contestation	Form of Political Practice	Empirical Indicators (Documents & Media Reports)	Impact on Governance
Differences in Response Narratives	Competing claims regarding effectiveness and speed of disaster response	Official statements by political actors comparing performance with one another	Public opinion polarization and fragmentation of perceptions toward policy
Credit Claiming	Claims of success in aid and rehabilitation programs	Publication of program achievements through press conferences and social media	Personalization of success and reduction of collective bureaucratic work
Blame Shifting	Shifting responsibility for delays in aid distribution	Statements blaming other levels of government or technical factors	Weakening of accountability and inter-agency coordination
Aid Distribution	Politicization of social assistance distribution	Presence of political attributes during aid distribution activities	Potential inequity and perceptions of clientelism
Symbolic Presence of Officials	Field visits and symbolic handover of assistance	Visual documentation in mass media and social media	Strengthening leadership image in the public sphere
Electoral Momentum	Intensification of public activities ahead of elections	Increased frequency of visits and public communication	Transformation of crisis policy into an instrument for political support mobilization

Source: Processed by researchers based on the results of limited documents and observations, 2025

Table 1 shows that post-disaster response and recovery do not occur in a policy space free of political interests, but rather within a dynamic configuration of power relations. The dimensions of differing response narratives demonstrate how political actors produce differing interpretations of the effectiveness and speed of crisis management. These competing claims are not simply differences in perception, but rather discursive strategies to establish moral authority and technocratic competence in the public eye. In this context, crisis policy becomes an arena for

a contest over meaning, where administrative facts are negotiated through political language. Consequently, public opinion is polarized, and policy legitimacy depends on the power of framing, rather than solely on substantive achievements.

The practice of credit claiming reinforces the personalization of politics in disaster governance. Claims of success in aid distribution or accelerated rehabilitation are often directly linked to specific figures, whether regional heads or national officials. Theoretically, this phenomenon can be explained by the logic of political survival, in which political actors seek to accumulate symbolic capital through public policy. However, personalizing success risks obscuring the collective nature of bureaucracy and cross-institutional collaboration that ultimately determine response effectiveness. When achievements are narrowed down to individual attributes, systemic accountability is weakened, and policy evaluation loses its structural depth.

Conversely, the practice of blame-shifting reveals the defensive side of political contestation. Shifting responsibility for distribution delays or technical constraints reflects an effort to avoid reputational damage. In a multilevel government system, such as Indonesia's, the fragmentation of authority can indeed create ambiguity about who is responsible. Critically, however, repeated shifting of responsibility can undermine inter-agency coordination and hinder policy learning. Rather than strengthening institutional capacity, this dynamic deepens fragmentation and undermines public trust in the integrity of crisis governance.

The distribution dimension of aid demonstrates how material resources can be transformed into political resources. The distribution of social assistance accompanied by political attributes or symbols demonstrates the politicization of welfare. Normatively, disaster relief should be based on the principles of need and distributive justice. However, when aid becomes an instrument of political representation, it risks clientelism and unequal access. Such practices can create the perception that access to aid depends on political proximity, rather than on levels of vulnerability, thereby reducing the moral legitimacy of social policies.

The symbolic presence of officials at affected locations also plays a central role in contestation. Field visits and symbolic aid deliveries have powerful visual appeal, especially in the digital media era. Theoretically, these actions can be understood as a form of performative governance, where the physical presence of leaders becomes part of the production of legitimacy. However, excessive symbolism can overshadow substance. When media exposure becomes more dominant than effective coordination, crisis policy risks becoming little more than a platform for political communication.

Electoral momentum further strengthens this dynamic of contestation. The intensification of public activity leading up to elections suggests that the recovery phase can be leveraged to mobilize support. Within the framework of political business cycle theory, public policy often accelerates or gains prominence approaching election periods. This does not necessarily imply manipulation; rather, it indicates the existence of structural incentives to maximize performance visibility. Consequently, policy priorities may be adjusted based on electoral considerations, rather than solely based on an analysis of long-term needs.

Overall, the six dimensions in the table demonstrate that post-disaster policy exists in a tension between technocratic rationality and political calculation. Bureaucratic coordination and resource distribution are inextricably linked to strategies of framing, claiming, and attribution of responsibility. In crises, the public demands clarity and certainty; however, intense political contestation can produce ambiguity and distorted information. Thus, the quality of crisis governance is greatly influenced by the extent to which political actors can refrain from excessive symbolic exploitation.

Public Perception and Its Impact on Political Trust

Public perceptions of the speed, transparency, and fairness of aid distribution play a crucial role in shaping levels of political trust. When responses are perceived as coordinated and communicative, there is a tendency for increased legitimacy and acceptance of government institutions. Conversely, perceptions of inaccurate targeting, lack of transparency, or politicization of aid contribute to skepticism and decreased trust. These findings strengthen the argument that direct public experience with post-disaster policies shapes broader political attitudes, including

electoral preferences. Thus, post-disaster governance plays a role not only in physical and social recovery but also in reshaping the trust relationship among the state, politicians, and citizens.

Public perceptions of post-disaster responses do not form spontaneously but rather result from the interaction of direct experience, exposure to information, and social dynamics at the community level (Kreutzer, 2023; Özkan & Uzun, 2025; Wei et al., 2026). Response speed, budget transparency, and fairness of aid distribution are readily observable indicators for the public, serving as concrete benchmarks for assessing state capacity. From the perspective of political trust theory, direct policy experience (policy feedback) has a stronger influence than normative promises or campaign rhetoric. This means that post-disaster policies impact not only the material conditions of citizens but also the formation of attitudinal orientations toward government institutions as a whole.

When citizens perceive government responses as coordinated and communicative, institutional legitimacy tends to increase. Visible coordination, for example, through orderly aid distribution and consistent information, creates a perception of state capacity. This perception is important because political trust is often based not solely on outcomes, but on processes perceived as fair and transparent (J. Wang & Zhang, 2025). Within the procedural justice framework, citizens are more accepting of policies when they perceive the decision-making process as open and accountable, even if the outcomes are not entirely satisfactory (Schnaudt et al., 2021).

Conversely, perceptions of inaccurate targeting or politicization of aid can trigger an erosion of trust. When aid distribution is perceived as biased or favoring certain groups, suspicions arise that policies are based not on needs but rather on political interests (Stauffer & Hadorn, 2025; Zuhdi et al., 2025). This skepticism has the potential to spill over into structural distrust of state institutions. In this context, negative post-disaster experiences can reinforce cynical sentiments toward political elites and deepen the gap between citizens and the government. The transparency dimension also has crucial implications. Unclear information regarding budgets, aid recipient criteria, or oversight mechanisms can create space for rumors and disinformation. In the digital age, negative perceptions can quickly spread through social media and form collective opinions that are difficult to correct. Therefore, public communication governance is a strategic component in maintaining stable trust. Substantive transparency, not merely an administrative formality, is a prerequisite for building long-term legitimacy.

The findings of this study also indicate a relationship between post-disaster policy experience and electoral preferences. Within the framework of retrospective voting, voters tend to evaluate government performance based on concrete experiences, including crisis management. If the response is deemed effective and fair, electoral support for the incumbent could increase. Conversely, distributional failures or perceived injustice can be driving factors for changes in political preferences (Montjoy & Chervenak, 2020; Rubin, 2020; A. H.-E. Wang, 2020). Thus, post-disaster policies serve as a performance-evaluation mechanism that directly affects democratic dynamics.

However, the relationship between public perception and political trust is not always linear (Bitonti et al., 2025; Zannakis et al., 2015). Factors such as partisan affiliation, education level, and media exposure also mediate public interpretations of policies. Individuals with particular political preferences may maintain support despite shortcomings in policy responses, as their perceptions are influenced by group identification. This suggests that a combination of empirical experience and ideological predispositions shapes political trust. Critically, it is important to distinguish between performance-based legitimacy and legitimacy built through symbolic framing. Increased trust resulting from effective communication does not necessarily reflect structural improvements in governance. If legitimacy is driven primarily by perceptions shaped through narratives, the sustainability of that trust is vulnerable to shifts in public opinion. Thus, post-disaster governance has a transformational dimension in state-citizen relations. Collective experiences facing crises can provide momentum for strengthening the social contract. Conversely, failure to meet expectations can deepen a crisis of trust that has far-reaching implications for political stability.

CONCLUSION

Post-disaster policy responses cannot be understood solely as administrative processes aimed at restoring the physical and social conditions of affected communities, but rather as a

complex interplay between bureaucratic capacity, political communication strategies, and the dynamics of public perception. Coordination across regional agencies, budget reallocations, prioritization of infrastructure recovery, and distribution of social assistance certainly reflect technocratic efforts to maintain the stability of public services. However, these entire processes are also produced and represented in the public sphere through narratives of responsive leadership, field visits, claims of success, and symbolic communication that reinforces legitimacy. Public perceptions of the speed, transparency, and fairness of aid distribution have proven crucial factors in shaping political trust, which in turn influence attitudes toward institutions and electoral preferences.

This study confirms that disasters can transform into political stages where legitimacy is produced, negotiated, and reproduced in the lead-up to electoral contests. Practices of credit claiming, blame shifting, the politicization of aid, and the intensification of public communication demonstrate that crisis policies are not entirely separate from electoral calculations. Thus, post-disaster governance serves a dual function as a risk management instrument and a mechanism for reproducing power through the symbolization of performance and the personalization of leadership. This study's limitations lie in its dominant focus on qualitative analysis of documents and public narratives, thereby failing to measure the quantitative impact on voter behavior fully. Furthermore, this study fails to compare variations in regional contexts or levels of government, which may produce different political dynamics. The study's weakness lies in its reliance on predominantly document-based data sources and media narratives, thereby failing to capture variations in public perceptions directly. Future research is recommended to integrate mixed-methods and cross-regional comparative analysis to deepen understanding of how disasters shape power configurations during electoral cycles.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The author made limited use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) technology, ChatGPT (OpenAI), to assist with grammar correction, sentence clarity, and language editing. All scientific content, analysis, data interpretation, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author. All content was reviewed and verified by the author. The author ensures that AI use does not replace the primary intellectual contribution to this research and adheres to the ethical standards of scientific publication.

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