

## Public Perceptions of Political Parties: A Thematic Analysis Based on Solomon's Perception Theory

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**Keywords:**

Political Perception; Political Parties; Solomon's Perception Theory; Public Trust; Political Communication

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**Abstract**

This study aims to analyze public perceptions of political parties using Michael R. Solomon's perception theory framework. The low level of public trust in political parties in Indonesia is the main background of this study. Using a qualitative approach with thematic analysis methods, this study involved 10 purposively selected informants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed through three coding stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The results identified eight main perception themes: (1) negative perceptions of political parties, (2) positive perceptions of political figures, (3) psychological burden, (4) social media as a source of information, (5) economic orientation, (6) political idealism, (7) apathy, and (8) changes in perception due to direct experience. Analysis using Solomon's perception theory shows that selective attention, selective distortion, selective retention, interpretation, perceived risk, and perceptual mapping play a significant role in shaping public perception. The majority of informants do not pay attention to political stimuli (selective attention), tend to distort positive information (selective distortion), and only remember negative information (selective retention). This study concludes that the crisis of trust in political parties is multidimensional and requires a repositioning strategy that includes increasing content salience, providing positive direct experiences, developing role models, and reducing perceived risk.

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### INTRODUCTION

Political parties, as a key pillar of democracy, face increasing credibility challenges (Aroyehun, 2024; Gebrihet & Eidsvik, 2024; Hadiwasito, 2024; Jamil & Azhar, 2024; Patnaik & Chauhan, 2024). The Indonesian Political Indicators Survey in January 2025 showed that political parties ranked lowest in terms of public trust, with only 4% of respondents stating they strongly trusted them, and 58% stating they trusted them, while the remainder had little or no trust at all. This fact indicates a significant gap between public expectations of the ideal role of political parties and the perceived reality. This crisis of trust is not a coincidence, but rather a cumulative process involving various aspects of communication and perception (Svensson & Nilsson, 2025; Wahyuni, 2024; Xu, n.d.). The social phenomenon underlying this research is the rise of young people's political participation on social media, but not accompanied by increased participation in formal politics. Young people's involvement is more digital and individualistic, rather than collective and organized. This indicates that despite massive exposure to political information through social media platforms, the perceptions formed do

not necessarily encourage participatory action (David, 2022; Jung et al., 2024; Ofei et al., 2024; Piriyasanti & Phuengpha, 2024; Sarwar et al., 2025; Supriyanto, 2024).

The urgency of this research is heightened by the 2024 post-election period and the approaching 2029 election cycle. Without understanding the perceptual mechanisms that sustain distrust, political parties cannot design effective repositioning strategies. Furthermore, the rise of AI-generated political content and deepfakes (Muhtadi & Wihardja, 2024) makes understanding selective distortion more critical than ever.

The novelty of this research lies in applying Solomon's six perceptual concepts simultaneously to political perception, moving beyond single-concept studies (e.g., only selective attention). Additionally, this study identifies eight thematic perception patterns from informant narratives, providing a grounded typology of political perception in the Indonesian digital context.

Public perception of political parties is generally built through two main channels: social media and direct experience. However, most previous studies have focused more on political party communication strategies (Hanif & Purwitasari, 2025) and the impact of political buzzers on democracy (Muhtadi & Wihardja, 2024). Not many have systematically analyzed how people personally process, select, and interpret political information to form complex and layered perceptions (Bakombo et al., 2023; Darwin et al., 2024; Kuai, 2026; Naeem et al., 2023). This literature gap is the gap that this study aims to fill, namely analyzing public perceptions of political parties using a comprehensive perception theory framework. The purpose of this study is to identify the main themes of public perceptions of political parties and analyze them using Solomon's perception theory. Specifically, this study will examine how selective attention, selective distortion, selective retention, interpretation, perceived risk, and perceptual mapping work in the context of political perception formation. This study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution by mapping the cognitive processes of society in viewing political institutions while providing practical recommendations for political parties in formulating communication strategies that are more based on the reality of public perception.

## **METHOD**

This study used a qualitative approach with thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the depth of meaning behind informants' statements and capture the complexity of subjective and contextual perceptions. Research informants consisted of Ten informants selected purposively with the following criteria: (a) Indonesian citizens aged 17–40 years (millennial and Z generations), (b) have access to and use social media, (c) reside in urban areas, and (d) are willing to participate in in-depth interviews. The diversity of informants' backgrounds (artists, editors, content creators, students, young professionals) is intended to capture a variety of representative perspectives. Data Collection Techniques with In-depth interviews became the main technique for data collection. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with a duration of 45–90 minutes per informant, using guidelines developed based on key concepts of Solomon's theory of perception. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to maintain informant confidentiality. Observations and field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal nuances that emerged during the interview process. Data analysis was conducted through three coding stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Creswell, 2014). In the

open coding stage, the researcher identified initial codes from the interview transcripts (e.g., empty promises, corruption, figures, stress, TikTok, money, idealism, apathy, disappointment). The axial coding stage grouped these codes into more abstract categories (mistrust, political personalization, psychological risk, information sources, economic motivation, social values, disengagement, disappointment). The selective coding stage combined these categories into eight main themes that became the core of the research findings. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (comparing statements between informants) and method triangulation (interviews and observations). In addition, member checking was conducted by reconfirming the researcher's interpretations with the relevant informants.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Thematic analysis of interviews with 10 informants resulted in eight main themes of perceptions of political parties. The following is an explanation of each theme accompanied by informant quotes. Theme 1: Negative Perception of Political Parties as Dishonest Systems. The majority of informants view political parties as institutions that do not represent the people, are full of corruption, and only promise things that are not realized. One informant stated: "parties only make promises, there is no realization" (Ipan, 39 years old, artist). Another informant emphasized: "lots of corruption, do not represent the people" (Rahmat, 28 years old, editor). This perception emerged among informants who did not have party affiliations and observed political dynamics remotely through digital media. Theme 2: Positive Perception of Political Figures (Not Parties) Although parties are perceived negatively, certain individual figures can build their own trust in the eyes of the public. One informant stated: "I trust the person more than the party" (Niki, 17 years old, student). A similar sentiment was expressed by another informant who stated that "the most influential factor is the honesty of the figure" (Rochmatullah, student). This finding indicates the personalization of politics, where political legitimacy shifts from institutions to individuals. Theme 3: Perception that Political Responsibility is Too Great. Some informants view politics as a heavy, stressful, and exhausting psychological burden. One informant stated: "politics is complicated and stressful" (Nida, content creator). The stress referred to stems not only from the complexity of political issues but also from irresponsible comments that are not followed up. This perception hinders active involvement, especially among female informants who feel they do not have enough energy to follow the world of politics. Theme 4: Social Media as a Source of Truth (or Lies) about Politics. The majority of informants admitted to getting political information from the platforms TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter). Informants stated: "I found out from TikTok" (Lita, 22 years old, student) and "I saw TikTok first and then I found out" (Isna, 24 years old, fresh graduate). This phenomenon shows that the informants' perceptions are not built through direct experience or formal political education, but rather through mediated reality that is full of pre-packaged narratives. Theme 5: Perception that Politics Can Become an Economic Field. Some informants see political parties as a gateway to getting a big salary, a job, or financial gain. One informant stated: "can get money or work" (Yusuf, private employee). This perception shows an instrumental orientation towards politics, where parties are seen more as vehicles to achieve economic interests than as institutions serving the public interest. Theme 6: Perception that Politics is a Vessel for Idealism and Social Change. A small number of informants, especially those with an activism background, see political parties as a means of fighting for certain values.

One informant stated: “want to fight for women’s rights” (Annisa, female activist). Another informant also mentioned that “parties can be a vessel for expressing rights” (Imam, student). This idealistic perception usually arises from informants who have positive experiences with party cadres or grew up in a politically active family environment. Theme 7: Apathy towards Politics. Some informants consider politics irrelevant to daily life and therefore unnecessary to follow. One informant stated: “politics is not important for my life. I just feel blank when it comes to politics” (Rahmat, editor). Initially, some informants such as Nida also did not follow political issues because they considered it incompatible with their lifestyle and work. Theme 8: Changes in Perception due to Direct Experience (Disconfirmation). Direct experience, both positive and negative, has been proven to change the initial perception of informants. Sandra, who had joined party activities, stated after her experience: “after joining, it turned out not to be as expected.” This disappointment changed her perception from neutral to negative and increased her skepticism towards all political content consumed. This phenomenon is called disconfirmation, which is a discrepancy between pre-purchase expectations and the reality experienced.

The discussion in this study uses the theoretical framework of perception proposed by Michael R. Solomon in *Consumer Behavior: Buying, Having, and Being* (2020). Solomon defines perception as “the process by which people select, organize, and interpret sensations to create a meaningful picture of the world.” This process consists of three main stages: exposure and attention, interpretation, and selective distortion and retention. Solomon’s five operational concepts are used to analyze the findings of this study. Selective Attention: Why Are Political Stimuli Ignored? Solomon explains that selective attention occurs because human cognitive capacity is limited. Individuals will only pay attention to stimuli that are: (a) relevant to current needs, (b) salient (striking, contrasting, unusual), or (c) consistent with values and interests. The findings of this study confirm that most informants do not pay attention to routine and unobtrusive political stimuli. Informant Rahmat stated that he does not follow political news because he is more focused on his editing work: “it’s just blank when it comes to politics.” Nida, a content creator, admitted to seeing political content on TikTok every day, but because she lacked personal relevance, she still ignored it. Lita and Isna were even more interested in foreign wars, which were considered more dramatic and viral, than domestic politics. This finding aligns with research by Muhtadi & Wihardja (2024) which found that there is selective exposure among Indonesian voters, where individuals selectively consume only political information that aligns with their preferences and partisan alliances. In this context, political parties seeking to change public perception must be able to create salient content: short, emotional, creative formats, and packaged in language that is familiar with the digital attention span of the younger generation.

Selective Distortion: Distorting Information to Strengthen Initial Beliefs. Selective distortion is the tendency of individuals to change or distort information to fit their existing beliefs and expectations. In this study, this phenomenon occurred most strongly in informants who already had negative cognitive schemas about political parties.

Ipan (an artist) who already believes that “politics is less than optimal, does not represent the voice of the people” tends to ignore or be suspicious of any positive information about parties, while immediately confirming negative information (confirmation bias). Nida, although not completely rejecting politics, stated that she “believes a little but not completely” and

distorts positive information into “just image.” Sandra, after a negative experience in the party, views all political content with high skepticism. In Solomon's theory, this phenomenon is called assimilation-contrast: information that is too far from initial beliefs can be rejected (contrast), while information that is slightly different can be assimilated to strengthen initial beliefs. This finding is in line with research by Muhtadi & Wihardja (2024) on selective belief among Indonesian voters, where partisan loyalty actually strengthens acceptance of disinformation and propaganda originating from within one's own political circles. The implication is that political parties are not enough to simply convey facts and achievements. They must first gradually change basic cognitive schemes through concrete and consistent actions that involve the public's direct experience. Sandra's statement shows that direct negative experiences actually strengthen distortions.

### **Selective Retention: Negative Information Lasts Longer in Memory**

Selective retention is the tendency of individuals to remember information that supports existing attitudes and beliefs, while forgetting information that contradicts them. The findings of this study indicate that informants with negative attitudes toward politics tend to remember negative information, while informants with positive attitudes remember positive information. Lita and Isna only remember that “mostly it’s just talk, but there’s no action” a strongly attached negative conclusion without a single mention of positive information. Imam who is interested in the party, on the other hand, remembers that “friends mostly tell good stories.” All informants in this study tend to have extreme, unbalanced memories, due to this selection process. This finding is important because it shows that political parties are not enough to just implement good programs, but must create positive memorable moments that are strong enough to be stored in the public’s long-term memory. Real social assistance programs, success stories of honest cadres, and positive impacts of policies directly felt by the community can be competitive candidates for positive memories. Interpretation: Meaning Attached to Political Symbols Interpretation is the assignment of meaning to stimuli based on cognitive schemas and past experiences. Solomon states that consumers (in this case voters) use mental schemas and stereotypes to interpret stimuli. In this study, there were very sharp differences in interpretation between informants. Rochmatullah interpreted the party through figures: "The most influential thing is the honesty of the figure." Niki, 17, also based her interest on "trust in figures" that she saw on social media. Sandra, after direct experience, interpreted political parties as "monopolistic, elbowing each other, cruel" a very negative meaning based on her direct experience. In contrast, Annisa, who grew up in an active family environment in the party, interpreted the party as "a vessel to accommodate the aspirations of the people," a positive-functional meaning.

Solomon's semiotic concept of signifier (physical symbols: party names, logos, attributes) and signified (inherent meaning) is highly relevant. The results of the study indicate that the signifier "political party" has been contaminated and carries a negative signified for most informants. However, the signified can still vary depending on experience, cognitive schemas, and the influence of the social environment. This suggests that parties cannot directly control meaning without changing their behavior and the consistency of their communication.

### **Perceptual Mapping: Mapping the Position of Parties in the Minds of the Public**

Perceptual mapping is a technique for observing how consumers position a product relative to competitors. In this study, the product in question is a political party. The majority of informants placed the political party in the “negative – dishonest – full of interests” dimension (Ipan, Rahmat, Nida, Lita, Isna). A small number (Annisa, Rochmatullah, Niki) placed it in the “positive – useful – a vehicle for aspirations” dimension. Several informants (Imam, Yusuf, Sandra after leaving) placed it in the “neutral – depending on the figure” dimension. This finding confirms that political parties need to reposition themselves gradually. Solomon emphasized that positioning is not only about the physical product, but about where it stands in the minds of consumers. A potentially effective repositioning strategy is to first change the behavior of party members, then communicate the change through trusted channels.

### **Perceived Risk: Understanding Psychological Barriers to Political Participation**

Perceived risk is the uncertainty felt by individuals before taking action (in this case: getting involved in politics or joining a party). Solomon identified several types of risks: functional, financial, physical, social, psychological, and time risks. The findings of this study indicate that informants who are not interested in politics primarily perceive psychological and functional risks. Nida, Lita, and Isna perceive psychological/emotional risks in the form of stress, burden of responsibility, and discomfort. Ipan perceives functional risks: the party will not represent his voice, so it is useless if he is involved. Sandra, after her experience, perceives social risks (internal conflict) and time risks (ineffective party activities). In contrast, interested informants (Imam, Annisa) have lower perceived risks due to information reinforcement from the social environment (friends or family). This finding is in line with Ekasari's (2020) research which found that perceived risk influences voter decision involvement, which ultimately impacts the stability of voters' political choices. For political parties, this finding shows the importance of risk reduction strategies: testimonials from satisfied members (reducing functional risk), trial membership or internship programs without commitment (reducing psychological and time risks), and transparency and accountability (reducing functional and social risks).

### **Synthesis of Findings**

Thus, study shows that negative perceptions of political parties are not a random phenomenon, but rather the result of a consistent accumulation of perceptual processes. Most informants pay no attention to political stimuli (selective attention), are suspicious of and distort positive information (selective distortion), only remember negative information (selective retention), and perceive high psychological and functional risks (perceived risk). The accumulation of these processes' places political parties in a very poor position in the public perception map (perceptual mapping). However, this study also found points of opportunity: credible individual figures can build trust despite negative perceptions of parties (political personalization), and people with positive direct experiences or social support have much better perceptions. This confirms the findings of Muhtadi & Wihardja (2024) that in the context of Indonesia's weak party system, personality-based partisan sentiments are the ones that more strongly influence many aspects of political engagement.

## CONCLUSION

This study concluded that public perception of political parties is complex and multidimensional, characterized by eight main themes, these eight themes include negative perceptions of parties, greater trust in figures than institutions, the perception of politics as a psychological burden, the dominance of social media in shaping perceptions, diverse economic orientations and idealism, and the existence of apathy and changes in perception due to direct experience. Analysis using Solomon's perception theory framework shows that the processes of selective attention, selective distortion, selective retention, interpretation, perceptual mapping, and perceived risk together shape public perceptions that tend to be negative towards party institutions. Theoretically, this study extends the application of Solomon's perception theory from the realm of commercial consumer behavior to the realm of political behavior, showing that the same cognitive processes (choosing, organizing, interpreting stimuli) apply in forming perceptions of political products. Practically, this study offers recommendations for political parties to reposition through four strategies: (1) increasing the salience of political content through creative formats that stand out and suit the digital attention span; (2) providing direct positive experiences for the public, because direct experiences have proven to be the most effective in overcoming selective distortion; (3) building consistent role models as new perceptual anchors amidst the crisis of trust in institutions; and (4) reducing perceived risk with open internship programs, budget transparency, and testimonials from satisfied members. This research has limitations in the limited number of informants and the coverage area which is only in urban areas. Further research can expand the geographic scope and explore differences in perceptions across age groups, education levels, and political affiliations.

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