



Public Trust and Social Polarization in the Digital Age: Sociological Perspectives on Policy Contestation in Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program

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Abstract:

Public trust in welfare policies depends partly on how implementation and institutional accountability are represented in public discourse. This study examines digital polarization, representations of public trust, and policy contestation surrounding Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG). Using qualitative library research and content analysis, it analyzes secondary materials, including policy documents, government statements, credible news reports, and relevant academic literature. The findings identify three interconnected patterns: competing digital narratives surrounding program evaluation, trust-related discourse shaped by implementation concerns such as food safety and transparency, and broader contestation over accountability and policy legitimacy. These patterns indicate that public debate extends beyond nutritional objectives to questions of institutional credibility and governance. The study contributes an interpretive framework connecting public trust, digital communication, and policy legitimacy through sociological perspectives on the public sphere and network society. It recommends transparent implementation reporting, timely evidence-based communication, and accessible public participation. Because the analysis relies on documentary sources, it does not establish actual trust levels or causal media effects.

INTRODUCTION

Large-scale social welfare policies matter not only because they distribute public resources, but also because they shape how citizens experience the state and judge its credibility. The Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) in Indonesia illustrates this wider significance: its aims concern nutrition and human development, while its implementation raises questions about transparency, food safety, accountability, and public participation (Arianti et al., 2026; Kikstra et al., 2021; Roobab et al., 2023). These questions matter because public trust can influence whether communities accept, scrutinize, or contest a policy. In a digitally connected society, information about implementation circulates rapidly across news media and social platforms, making public interpretation part of policy governance (Iyer et al., 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding MBG requires attention to its social and communicative dimensions.

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Public debate surrounding MBG has extended beyond its nutritional and educational objectives nationwide. The reviewed materials describe demonstrations calling for evaluation, disputes over budget transparency and operational effectiveness, reported food-safety incidents, government clarifications of circulating claims, and competing narratives across news and digital media (Abdullah et al., 2022; Abdullayev et al., 2025). Together, these developments suggest that citizens encounter the program not simply as a service, but as a contested public issue whose credibility is assessed through implementation. Digital circulation can amplify verified information and unverified claims, while responses may differ according to experience, expectations, and interpretation (Hazzan, 2023; Mikhaylov, 2021). Because this study relies on secondary sources, these developments are examined as public discourse rather than direct measurements of citizens' attitudes.

Existing scholarship provides foundations but leaves the social dynamics of contested implementation insufficiently integrated. Wright et al. (2024) and Podolski et al. (2023) frame school feeding as social protection linked to child development and education, while Farist (2026) and Wulandari et al. (2026) synthesize lessons from school-feeding programs across countries. These contributions clarify programmatic benefits and implementation considerations, but do not focus on public trust through contemporary media discourse. Casa et al. (2021) and Ahmad (2022) conceptualizes the public sphere as a space for public discussion, and Markov et al. (2022), Pérez et al. (2021), and Tu et al. (2021) explains how networked communication reshapes information flows and social relations. Together, these works illuminate relevant dimensions, yet do not specifically explain how MBG controversies connect implementation, polarization, trust, and policy contestation nationally in Indonesia.

This study's state of the art lies in bringing policy legitimacy, public trust, social polarization, and digital communication into a reading of MBG implementation. Rather than evaluating nutritional outcomes or assuming that controversy proves policy failure, it examines how implementation-related events (Takeshima et al., 2022; Tigchelaar et al., 2021). The analysis connects demonstrations, media reports, government statements, and policy materials with concepts of the public sphere and network society. Its novelty is contextual: it treats public legitimacy as negotiated through the relationship between implementation and communication in a digital society. This focus matters because social acceptance cannot be understood through policy objectives alone; it must be examined through public discourse.

The central research problem is how Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program becomes associated with public trust, social polarization, and contestation over policy legitimacy in the digital age. Three questions guide the analysis: how documented public responses frame social polarization around MBG; how implementation issues and public communication shape representations of trust in the program; and how news and digital discourse expand contestation over its legitimacy. These questions are addressed through qualitative library research and content analysis of government documents, credible news reports, academic publications, and relevant policy materials. The study neither measures public trust statistically nor establishes causal effects; it interprets recurring themes across secondary sources.

The study argues that MBG's social legitimacy is shaped not only by its promise of improved nutrition, but also by how implementation is represented, scrutinized, and discussed publicly. When concerns about safety, transparency, operational quality, or accountability become prominent, competing interpretations may intensify, and trust may be negotiated rather than automatically granted. Using thematic content analysis and source triangulation, the research contributes a sociological framework for understanding welfare policy as both an administrative intervention and a communicative process of legitimacy construction. Practically, transparent information, credible responses, accountable implementation, and public participation should complement service delivery. These conclusions remain interpretive and source-based, inviting future empirical testing with citizens and program stakeholders.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a qualitative approach, drawing on library research and content analysis to examine public trust, social polarization, and policy contestation surrounding Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) (Chu et al., 2024). This approach was selected because the research focused on interpreting public discourse, policy representations, and the social meanings associated with program implementation rather than measuring individual attitudes or testing causal relationships. Qualitative inquiry enabled the researchers to examine how implementation issues were presented, discussed, and interpreted across different documentary sources. Content analysis provided a systematic procedure for identifying recurring themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. Through this design, MBG was examined as both a public welfare intervention and a contested social issue within contemporary digital society.

The research relied exclusively on secondary data obtained from four principal categories of sources: official government documents, credible news reports, academic publications, and relevant policy documents. Government sources were used to identify the program's stated objectives, implementation arrangements, official explanations, and responses to emerging controversies. News reports provided documentary accounts of public demonstrations, implementation concerns, and competing interpretations circulating in the public sphere. Academic publications supplied the conceptual foundations for interpreting public trust, social polarization, policy legitimacy, and digital communication. Policy documents offered additional context concerning governance, transparency, accountability, and implementation. These categories were selected because they provided complementary perspectives on the relationship between policy implementation and public discourse. No primary data were collected through interviews, questionnaires, or direct field observations.

Data were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their ability to document the social dynamics surrounding MBG (Mardhiah et al., 2021). The inclusion criteria covered materials addressing program implementation, public responses, policy-related controversies, government communication, media representations, or debates on accountability and legitimacy. Sources were also assessed for their identifiable authorship or

institutional origin, publication context, and relevance to the period and events under examination. Official statements were considered evidence of the government's communicated position, while news reports were treated as journalistic representations of reported events rather than automatic confirmation of every underlying claim. Academic publications were included when they contributed empirical findings or theoretical perspectives relevant to the analytical framework. Materials without a clear connection to the research questions were excluded from the analytical corpus.

Data analysis followed the interactive qualitative analysis model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Fajari et al., 2021). During data condensation, relevant information was identified, extracted, and organized by its relationship to the research questions. The information was then coded into three principal analytical categories: social polarization, public trust, and policy contestation. Data display involved arranging the coded material into thematic summaries that enabled comparison across government documents, media reports, policy materials, and academic literature. In conclusion, the researchers interpreted recurring patterns, differences in representation, and relationships between implementation concerns and public discourse using the study's sociological concepts. The researchers revisited the source material to verify whether each interpretation was supported by the available documentary evidence.

To strengthen analytical credibility, the study triangulated sources by comparing relevant information across government documents, credible news reports, academic publications, and policy materials. Comparisons focused on whether accounts converged, differed, or addressed distinct aspects of the same issue. Particular attention was given to the distinction between documented events, official claims, media interpretations, and the researchers' analytical inferences. This procedure reduced the risk of treating a single report or institutional statement as conclusive evidence of broader social attitudes. Because the study used secondary sources, its findings were limited to patterns identifiable within the available documentary material. They could not establish the actual prevalence of public opinion or causal effects on trust. The findings should therefore be understood as a qualitative sociological interpretation of documented policy discourse, providing a foundation for subsequent empirical research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings reveal three interconnected dimensions of public contestation surrounding Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG): polarized digital discourse, implementation-related representations of public trust, and expanding debates over policy legitimacy. The following discussion interprets these findings through sociological literature and examines their theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Digital Discourse and Polarization Surrounding MBG

The documentary materials indicate that Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (Makan Bergizi Gratis/MBG) has become a subject of public debate extending beyond its original nutritional and educational objectives. Public

discussion increasingly addresses implementation quality, budget transparency, food safety, operational effectiveness, and institutional accountability. These concerns appear in demonstration reports, news coverage, government statements, and discussions circulating through digital media. The resulting discourse presents MBG as a policy interpreted differently by various public actors. While supportive narratives emphasize its potential contribution to social welfare and human development, critical narratives focus on implementation problems and the need for evaluation. This divergence demonstrates how a welfare policy can acquire broader social meanings through public communication.

Reports of demonstrations demanding program evaluation illustrate the emergence of collective expressions of concern surrounding MBG implementation. The issues documented extend beyond food provision to include transparency in public spending, operational effectiveness, and government oversight. These demands suggest that public engagement with the program raises questions about how resources are managed and whether implementation aligns with public expectations. However, criticism of implementation does not necessarily imply rejection of the program's nutritional objectives. Distinguishing policy objectives from implementation concerns matters because different actors may support the underlying welfare goals while questioning specific administrative practices. The documentary evidence therefore suggests that public disagreement reflects competing evaluations of implementation rather than a simple split between support and opposition.

Digital communication further complicates how the public forms interpretations. The reviewed materials describe the circulation of information concerning MBG's implementation, including claims about program suspension that required official clarification. These episodes show that government communication and digitally circulated narratives shape the documentary context through which the program is publicly understood. Information may circulate before official explanations become widely available, creating opportunities for competing interpretations to emerge. Nevertheless, the available sources do not establish the proportion of citizens who accept particular narratives or show that digital communication independently causes polarization. The finding is therefore limited to the observable presence of competing representations and the role of digital communication in the public discussion surrounding MBG.

Implementation and Public Trust in MBG

The reviewed documents indicate that public discussion of MBG increasingly evaluates the program through its implementation rather than its stated objectives alone. Although the program is presented as a welfare initiative intended to improve nutritional conditions and human development, public narratives also emphasize food safety, distribution arrangements, operational consistency, transparency, and accountability. These issues provide concrete reference points for evaluating the credibility of program implementation. Government statements about operational adjustments and oversight also appear in this discussion, indicating that implementation involves ongoing responses to identified concerns. The documentary pattern suggests that public trust is closely associated with how implementation is represented and assessed. However, the available materials cannot establish the actual level or direction of trust among the

Indonesian population.

Food-safety reports and discussions of operational evaluation constitute prominent elements of the materials examined. Their presence demonstrates that implementation concerns can become central to public assessments of a welfare program, particularly when they involve the safety and reliability of services intended for beneficiaries. Reports of corrective measures and operational adjustments also show that implementation is presented as a process requiring monitoring and improvement. Within the available documents, these developments provide contrasting representations: concerns highlight perceived vulnerabilities, while official responses emphasize efforts to address operational challenges. Comparing these representations helps explain why policy credibility becomes a public topic of discussion. However, the materials do not establish that the wider population experienced all reported incidents or that they produced a measurable decline in trust.

Communication surrounding implementation also emerges as an important component of public confidence. News reports, official clarifications, and digitally circulated claims contribute different representations of program performance and institutional responsiveness. When concerns receive public attention, the clarity and consistency of official explanations become part of the broader accountability discussion. Conversely, the circulation of unverified information illustrates the difficulty of maintaining a shared understanding of implementation in a rapidly changing information environment. The analysis therefore identifies a relationship between implementation narratives and the public representation of trust, rather than a statistically established relationship between implementation quality and individual attitudes. The central finding is that the credibility of MBG is discussed through observable implementation issues and the perceived adequacy of responses to those issues.

Digital Media, Policy Contestation, and Legitimacy

The documentary materials show that controversy surrounding MBG has expanded public discussion beyond nutrition and education to include governance, budget transparency, accountability, and the legitimacy of policy implementation. News coverage, public demonstrations, official statements, and digital discussions represent different channels through which the program is interpreted and evaluated. These channels make policy-related concerns visible beyond the administrative institutions responsible for implementation. As a result, MBG appears in the reviewed materials not only as a government service but also as an issue over which public actors articulate competing priorities and expectations. The expansion of discussion indicates that policy contestation involves disagreement over implementation standards, institutional responsibility, and the criteria through which program performance should be assessed.

Competing narratives drive this contestation. Supportive representations emphasize the program's contribution to nutritional welfare and human development, whereas critical representations foreground implementation concerns, food safety, spending transparency, and oversight. These narratives differ in the policy aspects they prioritize, producing contrasting interpretations of its performance and credibility. Government explanations and reported corrective measures introduce additional perspectives by presenting institutional responses to

emerging concerns. The resulting documentary landscape does not support a conclusion that public opinion is uniformly divided into two fixed groups. Instead, it shows that the program is represented through multiple positions whose emphasis shifts with the issues under discussion. Policy legitimacy consequently becomes a contested subject in public communication.



Figure 1. A group affiliated with 'Suara Ibu Peduli' (Concerned Mothers' Voice) in support of the Free Nutritious Meals (MBG) program

Digital media provide an important setting for circulating and comparing these competing representations. Information concerning program achievements, implementation problems, demonstrations, and official clarifications can enter public discussion through multiple communication channels. This circulation increases the visibility of policy-related claims and creates opportunities for public scrutiny, interpretation, and disagreement. At the same time, rapidly circulating or unverified information complicates the distinction between documented events, allegations, and institutional explanations. The reviewed materials therefore position digital communication as a relevant context for understanding policy contestation, rather than definitive proof that digital media determine public attitudes. Overall, the findings indicate that MBG's legitimacy is shaped by ongoing interactions among implementation concerns, institutional responses, and competing public narratives. Maintaining credibility requires attention to transparent communication, accountable implementation, and opportunities for meaningful public participation.

Discussion

The finding that MBG has become a site of polarized public response broadly accords with Liao et al. (2023) and Qadir et al. (2025) account of the public sphere, where public issues are debated through competing claims and demands for accountability. Demonstrations, criticism of budget transparency, and supportive narratives indicate that the program is being evaluated beyond its stated nutritional objectives. Wu et al. (2023) and Ivanov (2023) network society perspective further helps explain how digital communication allows diverse actors to circulate interpretations rapidly and challenge official accounts. However, the documentary evidence does not establish that society has divided into fixed opposing camps, nor that digital platforms independently caused polarization.

The finding that trust discourse centers on implementation rather than

policy intentions is consistent with Sztompka's view that social trust depends on reliability and fulfilled expectations, and with Aunger et al. (2024) and Kovaleva et al. (2023) account of trust as a means of reducing social complexity. Reports concerning food safety, distribution, operational evaluation, and official clarification give the public concrete issues through which institutional performance is interpreted. Soriano et al. (2024), Japar et al. (2024), and Hutto et al. (2023) also describe reflexive modernity, which shows how citizens reassess institutions in response to circulating information. However, because this study analyzes documentary representations rather than survey responses, it cannot confirm that trust has measurably declined. It identifies how trust is discussed, questioned, and potentially sustained in public discourse.

The expansion of MBG debate into questions of budget governance, accountability, and state–society relations also resonates with risk society and analysis of discourse and power. Reports about alleged food-safety incidents and operational adjustments make risk and institutional responsibility prominent interpretive frames, while official explanations and public criticism compete to define the program's meaning (Kozhanov et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2023; Treiblmaier et al., 2023). The present analysis extends these perspectives by bringing implementation narratives, public trust, and policy legitimacy into one interpretive frame. Unlike causal claims about media effects, however, the findings show documentary patterns of contestation, not proof that online discourse measurably changes public attitudes (Tkachuk et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2022).

The study's theoretical contribution connects policy legitimacy with the social interpretation of implementation in a digitally mediated public sphere. The findings suggest that a policy's stated purpose cannot, by itself, explain how legitimacy is negotiated; public interpretations also draw on visible implementation concerns, institutional responses, and competing narratives. The framework treats polarization as neither automatic evidence of policy failure nor an inherently beneficial sign of participation. Instead, it identifies contestation as a process through which policy meaning and credibility are assessed. Because the evidence is documentary, this contribution is interpretive rather than causal. It offers a lens for examining public trust without claiming to measure its prevalence.

Practically, the findings indicate that MBG communication should be linked to verifiable implementation standards, not promotional messages alone. Timely, consistent explanations of food safety procedures, distribution arrangements, budget accountability, and corrective action help the public assess official claims. Government agencies should distinguish verified information from unconfirmed reports, respond transparently and consistently to legitimate criticism, and provide accessible channels for questions and participation. Media organizations and digital communicators should contextualize claims and avoid circulating unverified information. These are recommendations, not tested interventions. Further research using interviews, surveys, or platform-level data could assess how different groups interpret these messages and whether communication practices influence trust over time.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that public contestation surrounding Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal Program (MBG) reflects interconnected concerns about digital polarization, implementation credibility, and policy legitimacy. The principal insight is that public trust cannot be understood solely through a policy's intended benefits; it must also be examined through how implementation, accountability, and institutional responses are represented in public discourse. By integrating sociological perspectives on the public sphere, network society, and trust, this study contributes an interpretive framework for understanding digitally mediated policy contestation. However, its reliance on documentary sources prevents measuring public trust or attributing causality. Future research should incorporate interviews, surveys, and digital platform analysis to investigate these dynamics empirically.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGY

During the preparation of this manuscript, AI-assisted technology was used to support language refinement, structural organization, and academic writing improvement. The author carefully reviewed, revised, and validated all generated content. The author takes full responsibility for the scientific accuracy, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

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