

When the State Plays “Philanthropist”: Social Aid as an Instrument of Power Legitimacy



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Abstract

Social assistance, traditionally regarded as a governmental mechanism for advancing public welfare, frequently extends beyond its humanitarian role in practice and encompasses substantial political implications. Rather than exclusively targeting poverty reduction and inequality mitigation, social assistance is often employed strategically to legitimize and perpetuate state authority. This study critically investigates the reconstruction of social assistance policies as instruments of political domination, wherein the state is portrayed as a “benefactor” whose generosity elicits gratitude and loyalty. Utilizing a qualitative, literature-based methodology, the research identifies recurring patterns of politicization of social assistance across diverse contexts. The findings reveal that political legitimacy is constructed through multiple interconnected mechanisms: the selective allocation of aid serving as political patronage; the internalization of the state’s “savior” narrative via symbolic violence that redefines assistance from a citizen’s entitlement to a discretionary favor; limited political literacy that restricts critical public engagement; and the utilization of aid delivery systems to map, monitor, and consolidate grassroots political support. Consequently, social assistance often becomes a transactional tool fostering clientelistic relationships, undermining democratic participation, and exacerbating social inequality. This study highlights the imperative to reform social assistance governance by emphasizing transparency, accountability, and a rights-based framework, alongside efforts to enhance critical political literacy within society.

Keywords:

Social assistance; Legitimacy of power; State as benefactor; Symbolic violence; Political literacy

Abstrak

Bantuan sosial yang secara konvensional dipahami sebagai alat negara untuk mensejahterakan masyarakat, dalam praktiknya sering beroperasi melampaui fungsi kemanusiaan dan menyimpan dimensi politik yang signifikan. Alih-alih semata ditujukan untuk pengentasan kemiskinan dan pengurangan ketimpangan, bantuan sosial kerap diposisikan sebagai instrumen strategis untuk melegitimasi dan mempertahankan kekuasaan negara. Penelitian ini bertujuan menelaah secara kritis bagaimana kebijakan bantuan sosial direkonstruksi untuk menopang dominasi politik dengan membingkai negara sebagai “dermawan” yang kebbaikannya menuntut rasa syukur dan loyalitas. Menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi literatur, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi pola politisasi bantuan sosial dalam berbagai konteks. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa legitimasi kekuasaan dibangun melalui beberapa mekanisme yang saling terkait: distribusi bantuan yang selektif sebagai sistem imbalan politik; internalisasi narasi negara sebagai “penyelamat” melalui kekerasan simbolik yang menggeser makna bantuan dari hak warga menjadi pemberian; rendahnya literasi politik yang membatasi kesadaran kritis masyarakat; serta pemanfaatan infrastruktur bantuan untuk memetakan dan mengonsolidasikan dukungan politik di tingkat akar rumput. Akibatnya, bantuan sosial cenderung berubah menjadi instrumen transaksional yang memproduksi relasi klientelistik, melemahkan partisipasi demokratis, dan memperdalam ketimpangan sosial. Studi ini menegaskan urgensi reformasi tata kelola bantuan sosial berbasis transparansi, akuntabilitas, dan pendekatan berbasis hak, disertai penguatan literasi politik kritis masyarakat.

Kata kunci:

Bantuan sosial; Legitimasi kekuasaan; Negara sebagai dermawan; Kekerasan simbolik; Literasi politik

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Introduction

The state's role in providing social assistance is commonly perceived as a moral obligation to ensure public welfare.¹ Nevertheless, in practice, social assistance does not always function in a neutral or purely humanitarian manner. In numerous contexts, such assistance serves as a tool to bolster political legitimacy.² The state positions itself as a benevolent entity by distributing various forms of aid, including basic food packages, cash transfers, and other subsidies; however, underlying this apparent generosity is a pronounced political agenda.³ Social assistance is often utilized to cultivate a favorable governmental image, particularly in the period preceding significant political events such as elections.⁴ Regrettably, the genuine needs of society are sometimes overlooked or only partially addressed to preserve political allegiance. This dynamic is further intensified by low levels of political literacy among the populace, which results in the passive acceptance of social assistance without critical examination of its underlying motives or long-term implications.

Under these conditions, assistance intended as a mechanism for redistribution instead serves to reinforce existing power imbalances.⁵ The state exploits public reliance on aid to perpetuate its hegemony, while society remains relegated to the role of a passive recipient, deprived of opportunities for structural empowerment. This dynamic engenders unequal power relations and cultivates patterns of dependency that are challenging to overcome. Moreover, the state not only provides assistance but also constructs a narrative portraying itself as indispensable for societal survival.

¹ Hidra Amnur, Nuria Sisma Putri, And Deni Satria, " Group Decision Support System Untuk Menentukan Kelayakan Penerima Bantuan Sosial Dengan Metode AHP (Analytical Hierarchy Process) Dan Borda," *JITSI: Jurnal Ilmiah Teknologi Sistem Informasi* 3, No. 3 (September 2022): 94-102, <https://doi.org/10.30630/jitsi.3.3.95>.

² Franciscus Adi Prasetyo Et Al., " Masalah Dan Rekomendasi Bantuan Sosial: Studi Kasus Program Bantuan Sosial Kompensasi Bbm Di Kabupaten Jember," *Share: Social Work Journal* 13, No. 1 (August 2023): 52, <https://doi.org/10.24198/Share.V13i1.45720>.

³ Dian Herdiana, " Pengawasan Kolaboratif Dalam Pelaksanaan Kebijakan Bantuan Sosial Terdampak Covid-19," *Jdp (Jurnal Dinamika Pemerintahan)* 3, No. 2 (August 2020): 85-99, <https://doi.org/10.36341/jdp.V3i2.1323>.

⁴ Fadhila Nur Fitria, Syakir Ridho Wijaya, And Fairuz Arta Abhipraya, " Efektivitas Penyaluran Bantuan Sosial Dari Pemerintah Untuk Disalurkan Kepada Masyarakat Terdampak Pandemi Covid-19 Di Kabupaten Ponorogo Tahun 2020," *Jurnal Politikom Indonesiana* 6, No. 1 (July 2021): 40-50, <https://doi.org/10.35706/jpi.V6i1.5330>; Siti, " Efektivitas Penyaluran Dana Bantuan Sosial Tunai Pada Masa Pandemi Covid-19 Di Kabupaten Rokan Hilir," *Jurnal Sumber Daya Manusia Unggul (JSDMU)* 2, No. 2 (June 2022): 1-7, <https://doi.org/10.46730/jsdmu.V2i2.29>.

⁵ Frank Reichert, " How Internal Political Efficacy Translates Political Knowledge into Political Participation: Evidence from Germany," *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 12, no. 2 (May 2016): 221-41, <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.v12i2.1095>; Annisa Nur Syafitri, Astika Ummy Athahirah, and Herlina, " Strengthening Digital-Based Community Political Literacy in the Prevention of Money Politics in South Bangka Regency," *Jurnal Multidisiplin Madani* 4, no. 11 (November 2024): 1646-56, <https://doi.org/10.55927/mudima.v4i11.12328>.

Consequently, social assistance transcends its function as a mere social policy and becomes a subtle yet potent instrument of power that sustains political dominance.⁶

The majority of existing research on social assistance has predominantly concentrated on evaluating program effectiveness in alleviating poverty and enhancing economic welfare.⁷ Emphasis is often placed on technocratic factors such as distribution efficiency, targeting precision, and macroeconomic consequences. Nevertheless, this focus results in a substantial gap in the comprehension of the political dimensions inherent in social assistance policies. Numerous studies neglect the ways in which such assistance is employed by political actors to consolidate and sustain their power. Furthermore, there is a notable scarcity of research investigating how socio-cultural factors influence public responses to the politicization of aid. In developing country contexts, patron-client relationships and personal connections between communities and political figures are pivotal in shaping the allocation of assistance.⁸

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of the operation of social assistance within power dynamics, it is essential to address several critical questions. First, in what ways is social assistance employed as a mechanism for political legitimacy? Are there identifiable mechanisms or patterns through which assistance is connected to political interests? Second, what are the political consequences of social assistance policies on broader power structures? Do these policies create new forms of inequality, or do they primarily reinforce existing social hierarchies? Third, how does society perceive and respond to the politicization of social assistance? Are individuals cognizant of the political agendas underlying aid distribution, or do they regard it as an ordinary aspect of everyday political life? These inquiries are significant as they facilitate a more critical examination of the state's role as a political actor, rather than solely as an administrative institution.

The central argument presented in this study posits that social assistance is not a politically neutral policy. It often serves as an instrument employed by ruling elites to

⁶ Febri Fajar Pratama and Deni Chandra, "Dampak Strategis Upaya Penanggulangan Kemiskinan Masyarakat Perkotaan Pada Masa Pandemi COVID-19 Melalui Program PKH Di Kota Tasikmalaya," *Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Sosial* 8, no. 1 (June 2022): 63–76, <https://doi.org/10.23887/jiis.v8i1.41238>; Nur Arif Khairudin et al., "Implementasi Sistem Informasi Pengelolaan Bantuan Warga Kampung Pulojahe Jakarta Timur Berbasis Web," *Selaparang: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat Berkemajuan* 6, no. 1 (March 2022): 355, <https://doi.org/10.31764/jpmb.v6i1.7881>.

⁷ Nisa'ul Mufida, "Efektivitas Bantuan Sosial Tunai Di Kelurahan Purwosari Kecamatan Purwosari Kabupaten Pasuruan," *Jurnal Sosial Dan Sains* 1, no. 2 (February 2021): 82–92, <https://doi.org/10.59188/jurnalsosains.v1i2.23>; Fitriani Fitriani, Rudi Kurniawan, and Tati Suprapti, "Penerapan Algoritma K-Means Clustering Untuk Identifikasi Kelayakan Penerima Bantuan Program Keluarga Harapan (Pkh) Di Desa Tambaksari CIAMIS," *JATI (Jurnal Mahasiswa Teknik Informatika)* 7, no. 6 (February 2024): 3363–69, <https://doi.org/10.36040/jati.v7i6.8197>.

⁸ Cesi Cruz and Christina J. Schneider, "Foreign Aid and Undeserved Credit Claiming," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2 (April 2017): 396–408, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12285>; Albina Gallyamova and Dale T. Miller, "Psychology of Personal Political Engagement in Russia: Unpacking Perceived Community Culture, Pluralistic Ignorance, and System Justification," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 55, no. 8 (December 2024): 926–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220221241279218>.

sustain and augment their power. Within this framework, the state functions not merely as a provider of aid but also as a that allocates assistance with the expectation of securing political loyalty in return. Consequently, the relationship between the state and society becomes transactional: assistance is granted not as a fulfillment of citizens' rights but as a reward for political support. Such practices perpetuate social inequality, as certain groups receive maximal benefits while others remain marginalized. Rather than empowering individuals to attain independence, society is rendered dependent on the state's benevolence.

The research method utilized in this study is qualitative, employing a library-based research design. This methodological approach is justified by the study's aim to achieve a profound and comprehensive understanding of the political aspects of social assistance as a mechanism for legitimizing power. A qualitative methodology is chosen due to its ability to capture the complexity of social phenomena by emphasizing the subjective and interpretive dimensions of data, thereby facilitating analysis from the perspectives of the actors involved (emic) as well as the broader social context. The study's material focus centers on the concept of the "state as benefactor," addressing issues such as the politicization of aid, patron-client relationships, the internalization of state narratives, and the reinforcement of power structures through assistance infrastructures.

The research employs an exploratory and critical design, utilizing qualitative secondary data obtained from selected academic sources, including journal articles, books, and pertinent research reports. These sources are purposively chosen based on their credibility, relevance, and the diversity of theoretical perspectives they offer. The data analysis proceeds through multiple stages, beginning with data reduction to identify key themes, followed by the presentation of findings in structured analytical narratives, and culminating in source triangulation to compare and contrast perspectives, thereby enhancing the robustness of the argument. This methodological approach enables the study to elucidate how values, norms, and prevailing power dynamics within society are perpetuated through social assistance policies, while concurrently deconstructing dominant narratives to reveal their underlying political functions.

Results and Discussion

Social Assistance as a Targeted Political Benefit

Drawing upon a critical synthesis of pertinent literature, this study delineates four fundamental mechanisms that are intricately interrelated in facilitating the politicization of social assistance. These mechanisms function not independently but as components of a cyclical process of political legitimation, which concurrently consolidates state authority and exacerbates structural inequalities. To offer a comprehensive summary, Table 1 below presents each mechanism alongside its

defining features, associated impacts, and the theoretical and empirical bases supporting it.

Table 1. Mechanisms Underlying the Politicization of Social Assistance and Their Consequential Impacts

No	Politicization Mechanism	Concise Overview	Impact on Society and Democratic Processes
1	Selective Distribution (Patronage)	Social assistance is distributed as a mechanism of political patronage, predicated on loyalty instead of objective criteria of need	Produces clientelistic citizenship, undermines universal political rights, and diminishes democratic participation
2	Symbolic Violence	The state characterizes assistance as a or an act of rather than as a right, employing discourse and public rituals to do so.	The internalization of gratitude diminishes demands for accountability and undermines critical awareness of injustice
3	Limited Political Literacy	Communities often lack the critical awareness necessary to interrogate the political dimensions inherent in social assistance programs.	This phenomenon facilitates political manipulation, diminishes democratic participation, and undermines social control.
4	Exploitation of Support Infrastructure	Beneficiary data and distribution networks are utilized to map support, monitor populations, and consolidate power at the grassroots level.	This phenomenon reinforces existing power structures, diminishes community agency, and exacerbates social inequality.

The source was developed by the author through a synthesis of existing research findings.

As demonstrated in Table 1, these four mechanisms constitute a cyclical causal relationship. The process begins with selective distribution, which establishes the foundations of patron–client relations. The state then reinforces this dynamic through symbolic violence, converting rights into gratitude. Low levels of political literacy facilitate the internalization of this narrative with minimal resistance, while assistance infrastructures are utilized to identify and consolidate political support at the grassroots level. The subsequent sections will provide an in-depth analysis of each mechanism, supported by theoretical and empirical evidence from various contexts.

The allocation of social assistance in contemporary societies is often closely intertwined with political considerations. In numerous contexts, social assistance serves not only as a welfare mechanism aimed at addressing the needs of vulnerable populations but also as a tool for sustaining political power. Although social assistance should ideally be impartial and grounded in principles of social justice, it is frequently allocated selectively, particularly to groups perceived as offering electoral benefits to those in authority. Consequently, patterns of social assistance distribution reflect

entrenched practices of patronage and clientelism that characterize political systems in many developing countries and states with fragile democracies. This biased distribution has significant implications for governance, social justice, and long-term developmental outcomes.

When communities begin to perceive social assistance primarily as a means of survival, their understanding of civic obligations may become distorted. Democratic citizenship gradually transforms into clientelistic citizenship, wherein political loyalty is required to access resources. This dynamic creates a feedback loop: increased political loyalty enhances the likelihood of receiving assistance, and greater assistance further entrenches that loyalty. Consequently, this relationship diminishes public comprehension of universal political rights and undermines the foundations of robust political participation.⁹ The distribution of social assistance becomes particularly susceptible to politicization during periods of political instability, as allocations are disproportionately directed toward regions perceived as capable of delivering political support. In such circumstances, assistance shifts from being welfare-oriented to serving short-term electoral interests.¹⁰

This phenomenon is often accompanied by increasing corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency, which further undermine the effectiveness of social assistance in addressing social issues. The impact of social assistance is substantially reduced when its allocation is influenced by political interests. Local elites frequently prioritize personal or group gains over the welfare of the broader community. Consequently, assistance intended to promote development instead becomes a mechanism for perpetuating social injustice and reinforcing unequal power structures.¹¹ Within the public policy literature, governance and social accountability are widely recognized as critical determinants of effective social assistance. Nonetheless, in practice, corruption remains a significant impediment. Political institutions that should guarantee equitable distribution are frequently compromised by elite interests, resulting in inefficiencies that hinder the optimal delivery of assistance to target populations.¹² Mismanagement of assistance can engender long-term public distrust, which subsequently diminishes engagement in legitimate political

⁹ Meike Eilert and Stefanie Robinson, "The Impact of Cause Portfolio Focus and Contribution Amount on Stakeholder Evaluations," *Business & Society* 59, no. 7 (September 2020): 1483-514, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650318761858>.

¹⁰ Jinyang Cai et al., "Has International Aid Promoted Economic Growth in Africa?," *African Development Review* 30, no. 3 (September 2018): 239-51, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8268.12333>.

¹¹ Paul Collier and David Dollar, "Aid Allocation and Poverty Reduction," *European Economic Review* 46, no. 8 (September 2002): 1475-500, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921\(01\)00187-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921(01)00187-8).

¹² Nurwani, "Analisis Sistem Pengendalian Intern Pemerintah Pada Pengelolaan Belanja Bantuan Sosial Di Dinas Sosial Kota Parepare."

processes.¹³ Politically motivated distortions exacerbate inequality, thereby complicating the attainment of sustainable development goals.¹⁴

The politicization of aid is particularly pronounced in the health sector, where the allocation of health assistance is frequently influenced by anticipated political loyalty, favoring specific groups. In societies characterized by histories of conflict or social tension, health aid may be employed as a tool of social engineering. This practice raises significant ethical concerns, as health represents a fundamental human need that should remain impartial to political considerations. Consequently, public health outcomes may become dependent on the political affiliations of recipients. For instance, groups aligned with the ruling regime often receive superior health services compared to those perceived as opposition. Such practices not only exacerbate inequality but also risk deepening social divisions within society.

The distribution of social assistance ultimately reflects the intricate political dynamics that influence it. Rather than functioning solely as a response to societal needs, social assistance is frequently shaped by political strategies aimed at maintaining power. The ramifications of these practices extend beyond developmental inefficiencies; they undermine robust political participation, exacerbate inequality, and contribute to social fragmentation. Addressing these issues necessitates comprehensive reforms of assistance distribution systems to ensure they are more firmly grounded in principles of social justice and sustainable development. Transparency, accountability, and good governance must constitute the foundational pillars of such reforms. Only under these conditions can social assistance fulfill its intended role as a mechanism for poverty reduction, welfare improvement, and the strengthening of democratic institutions. Fostering a political culture anchored in authentic development goals—rather than mere partisan allegiance—remains both a significant challenge and an urgent imperative for many nations today.

The Internalization of the State's Narrative as a "Savior" by Society

Symbolic violence functions through nuanced and systematic mechanisms that transform public perceptions of social assistance. The state exercises power not only through coercion but also through discourse, categorization, and representations that shape societal understandings of social reality. Within the context of social assistance, symbolic violence manifests in various interconnected forms. Table 2 below delineates these forms of symbolic violence, their modes of operation, and their effects on public political consciousness.

¹³ Kevin M. Morrison, "Oil, Nontax Revenue, and the Redistributive Foundations of Regime Stability," *International Organization* 63, no. 1 (January 2009): 107–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818309090043>.

¹⁴ Andreas Fuchs, Axel Dreher, and Peter Nunnenkamp, "Determinants of Donor Generosity: A Survey of the Aid Budget Literature," *World Development* 56 (April 2014): 172–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.09.004>.

Table 2. Manifestations and Illustrative Examples of Symbolic Violence within Social Assistance

No	The Manifestation of Symbolic Violence	Mechanism of Operation	Psycho-Political Implications
1	Conceptualizing as a “Gift”	Assistance is characterized as an act of state benevolence rather than as a constitutional entitlement.	Fosters excessive gratitude and diminishes the pursuit of accountability.
2	Public Rituals and Ceremonies	Aid distribution is carried out during public events prominently featuring state symbols.	This reinforces the perception of the state as a “savior” and contributes to the construction of social hierarchies.
3	Social Media Narratives	The visual content emphasizes the recipients’ expressions of gratitude and the benevolence of the officials.	This process intensifies the internalization of dependency and further marginalizes narratives grounded in rights.
4	Stigmatization and Categorization	Beneficiaries are often designated or,	This diminishes political agency and perpetuates subordinate social positions.

This work was developed by the author through a synthesis of existing research findings.

As demonstrated in Table 2, symbolic violence within social assistance manifests through various channels, including discursive framing, public rituals, and digital media representations. These forms are not isolated; instead, they are interrelated in shaping a hegemonic narrative that portrays the state as a “savior.” This dynamic reconfigures social assistance from a constitutional right into a “gift” that implicitly requires reciprocal political loyalty. Consequently, citizens are more likely to experience a sense of indebtedness rather than to assert demands for accountability, thereby undermining the foundations of critical political engagement.

The relationship between state-provided social assistance and citizens’ perceptions is complex and multifaceted. It is shaped by the interplay among state institutions, social norms, and the psychological frameworks that emerge within society. Two central concepts frequently emphasized in this discourse are gratitude and entitlement. In social policy practice, state-distributed assistance is often framed not as an inherent right of citizenship but as an act of state benevolence. This framing encourages citizens to feel gratitude rather than to assert their rights. Such asymmetrical framing has been a longstanding concern among scholars. Tissot illustrates that narratives of “state benevolence” in social assistance can suppress public criticism, even when policies inadequately address societal needs.¹⁵ Similarly, Anner

¹⁵ Sylvie Tissot, “Categorizing Neighborhoods: The Invention of ‘Sensitive Areas’ in France and ‘Historic Districts’ in the United States,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 42, no. 1 (January 2018): 150–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12530>.

argues that portraying citizens as aid recipients who are “indebted” engenders unequal power relations.¹⁶ Within this framework, the state assumes the role of benefactor, while citizens are relegated to passive recipients.

Citizens may come to perceive that assistance can be readily withdrawn, thereby fostering a sense of gratitude that supersedes the assertion of rights.¹⁷ This perception has significant implications for political dynamics. Narratives emphasizing state benevolence can engender political compliance that serves to uphold existing power structures. Consequently, citizens may become hesitant to critique unjust policies due to a perceived moral indebtedness to the state. Over time, this dynamic can perpetuate structural inequalities and diminish opportunities for critical civic engagement. In the digital age, social media has emerged as a novel platform where these narrative contests take place. Ranji underscores the dual role of social media: while it facilitates advocacy and community mobilization, it can simultaneously reinforce narratives of dependence on state benevolence.¹⁸ For example, when governments disseminate content on social media showcasing the distribution of social assistance, the constructed narrative often highlights emotional elements—such as recipients’ expressions of gratitude, officials smiling while distributing aid, and the prominence of state symbols. These narratives emphasize the state’s role as a “helper” rather than as a guarantor of citizens’ rights.

Simultaneously, civil society groups can leverage social media to contest prevailing narratives by highlighting that social assistance is an integral component of citizens’ constitutional rights. Emotional interdependence and perceptions of power significantly influence how individuals interpret state-provided assistance. Even those who feel empowered may harbor biased views of their circumstances, perceiving the assistance they receive as a “bonus” or “privilege” rather than a universally guaranteed right. The interplay among empowerment, perceptions of power, and lived experiences of social assistance complicates our understanding of state–citizen relations. Instead of fostering critical awareness, these emotional connections often bind citizens to a moral obligation to express gratitude.¹⁹ More broadly, this dynamic

¹⁶ Mark Anner, Matthew Fischer-Daly, and Michael Maffie, “Fissured Employment and Network Bargaining: Emerging Employment Relations Dynamics in a Contingent World of Work,” *ILR Review* 74, no. 3 (May 2021): 689–714, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793920964180>.

¹⁷ Katarzyna Sekścińska, Joanna Rudzinska-Wojciechowska, and Diana Jaworska, “The Effect of State and Trait Power on Financial Risk-Taking: The Mediating and Moderating Roles of Optimism,” *PLOS ONE* 17, no. 10 (October 2022): e0276878, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0276878>.

¹⁸ Banafsheh Ranji, “Shaping News Waves and Constructing Events: Iranian Journalists’ Use of Online Platforms as Sources of Journalistic Capital,” *New Media & Society* 23, no. 7 (July 2021): 1936–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820925457>.

¹⁹ Sekścińska, Rudzinska-Wojciechowska, and Jaworska, “The Effect of State and Trait Power on Financial Risk-Taking”; Mine Karatas-Ozkan et al., “Challenging the Assumptions of Social Entrepreneurship Education and Repositioning It for the Future: Wonders of Cultural, Social, Symbolic and Economic Capitals,” *Social Enterprise Journal* 19, no. 2 (April 2023): 98–122, <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-02-2022-0018>.

illustrates a social process wherein power, identity, and citizen agency intersect with state provision.

The preceding analysis demonstrates that conceptualizing social assistance as an act of state generosity, rather than as an inherent right, generates a complex network of symbolic power that influences public perception and individual behavior. This symbolic power is exercised by the state through discourse, public spaces, social stigma, and digital media, thereby subtly shaping citizens' understanding of their relationship with the state. The psychological implications of this narrative are significant: it fosters excessive gratitude, inhibits criticism of unjust policies, and promotes political compliance. Concurrently, contemporary technologies present new avenues to challenge dominant narratives, although they also risk reinforcing them. Consequently, comprehending this framework is essential. Activists, scholars, and policymakers must collaborate to reframe the discourse surrounding social assistance. Such a reframing should emphasize that social assistance constitutes a fundamental right of every citizen, rather than a charitable gift. Only through this approach can social advocacy and justice-oriented initiatives effectively empower citizens as rights holders, rather than as passive recipients of state benevolence.

Limited Political Awareness and Low Levels of Critical Engagement

The assertion that low political literacy contributes to substantial misunderstandings concerning the political aspects of social assistance is substantiated by empirical evidence demonstrating a correlation between political literacy and civic engagement. Research indicates that individuals with limited political literacy frequently fail to recognize how social policies may serve as instruments of mobilization for those in power. This lack of awareness can result in passive citizenship; despite being directly affected by social assistance policies, such individuals do not engage critically with the democratic processes related to these policies. Consequently, oversight and accountability in governance are weakened. Furthermore, political engagement among younger generations is strongly associated with exposure to political information, much of which is mediated through media literacy. In this context, media literacy plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' comprehension of political processes.²⁰

Existing scholarship highlights that political literacy should be understood not solely as an individual trait but as a social construct influenced by comprehensive educational strategies. Educational systems that deliberately incorporate political literacy into their curricula have been demonstrated to improve students' comprehension of democratic engagement. This finding underscores the critical role of formal education in shaping political attitudes and behaviors.²¹ The necessity of

²⁰ Mihailidis and Thevenin, "Media Literacy as a Core Competency for Engaged Citizenship in Participatory Democracy."

²¹ Hatice Güler, "An Analysis of the Political Literacy Levels of Preservice Social Studies Teachers," *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 10, nos. S1-Aug (August 2022): 179–85, <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v10iS1-Aug.4874>.

political education is particularly pronounced for young individuals receiving social assistance, who are at a pivotal stage in developing their political orientations. In the absence of a robust foundation in political literacy, this demographic is at an increased risk of accepting misinformation regarding policies that significantly impact their welfare.²²

The relationship between political literacy and civic participation indicates that enhancing educational opportunities centered on political processes can significantly influence democratic engagement within society. Empirical evidence demonstrates that as individuals' political literacy improves, they are not only more inclined to exercise their voting rights but also to develop a more nuanced understanding of the policy implications related to social issues, including social assistance.²³ This underscores the necessity for targeted interventions aimed at addressing existing inequalities and fostering inclusivity in civic participation. Moreover, political literacy encompasses more than the acquisition of policy knowledge; it also entails cultivating a sense of agency – the capacity and confidence of citizens to actively engage in shaping their political environment. Given the increasing complexity of political landscapes, the development of comprehensive educational frameworks that prioritize political literacy is of paramount importance. It is therefore strongly advocated that political literacy initiatives be integrated into broader democratic education programs, particularly those targeting young individuals experiencing socio-economic disadvantages.

By providing individuals with the requisite knowledge to participate effectively in political discourse, societies can cultivate a more critical and informed electorate capable of advocating for their interests within the political sphere.²⁴ The benefits of enhanced political literacy extend beyond individual empowerment, facilitating structural transformation by enabling marginalized groups to influence policy decisions that directly affect their lives. As public awareness of the consequences of political decisions on disadvantaged communities grows, the connection between political literacy and social support becomes increasingly prominent in discussions of democratic participation and accountability.²⁵ This relationship underscores the

²² Riya Anjarsari, "Implementing the Role of The Ngos in Curricular and Societal PPKn Through Political Literacy in Indonesia," *RSF Conference Series: Business, Management and Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (September 2023): 77–85, <https://doi.org/10.31098/bmss.v3i3.694>.

²³ Huzaifa Katarudin and Nora Eka Putri, "Pengaruh Literasi Politik Terhadap Partisipasi Politik Pemilih Pemula Pada Pemilukada Kota Pariaman Tahun 2018," *Jurnal Manajemen Dan Ilmu Administrasi Publik (JMIAP)*, September 1, 2020, 70–79, <https://doi.org/10.24036/jmiap.v2i2.136>.

²⁴ Vivek Jadhav, "Democracy, Dictatorship and People's Beliefs: Evidence from the World Value Longitudinal Survey," preprint, In Review, January 17, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-2485463/v1>; R. Randiawan, Karim Suryadi, and Muhammad Nur, "The Concept of Democracy Education as an Effort for Developing The Political Culture of Participating Communities," *International Journal Pedagogy of Social Studies* 8, no. 1 (July 2023): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijposs.v8i1.52770>.

²⁵ Mihailidis and Thevenin, "Media Literacy as a Core Competency for Engaged Citizenship in Participatory Democracy."

imperative to develop citizens who are both informed and responsive to the political dynamics that shape their lives.

Addressing low political literacy extends beyond merely increasing knowledge; it constitutes a vital step toward promoting more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable democratic processes. Without a sufficient understanding of political dynamics and the consequences of social policies, individuals risk remaining passive observers rather than active participants in democracy. Therefore, educational initiatives that emphasize the significance of both political literacy and media literacy are essential for cultivating informed and critical citizens capable of engaging meaningfully in political discourse related to social assistance and other public policy matters. In this context, political literacy encompasses not only the comprehension of politics but also the reclamation of democratic space to ensure greater accountability to the needs of the populace.

Reinforcement of Power Structures through Assistance Infrastructure

The relationship between social assistance infrastructure and political dynamics has emerged as a significant focus within contemporary social science research. Social assistance infrastructure should not be understood solely as a technical mechanism for aid distribution; rather, it represents a domain where political, economic, and social interests converge. In practice, social assistance strategies involve multiple components, including the management of beneficiary data, distribution mechanisms, and networks of volunteers functioning at the local level. These components serve a dual purpose: they are crucial for ensuring the equitable and efficient delivery of welfare services, while simultaneously being utilized as political tools to identify support bases, consolidate power networks, and extend social control at the grassroots level. A substantial body of literature underscores that acknowledging this duality is fundamental to comprehending the operation of social infrastructure in everyday settings.

Humanitarian actors engaged in the provision of social assistance do not function solely as distributors of resources; they also play a significant role in reinforcing political relationships within society.²⁶ Social assistance infrastructure can therefore be conceptualized as a dual distribution mechanism—one that disseminates material resources while concurrently channeling political influence. A defining feature of social assistance infrastructure is its ability to connect a diverse array of stakeholders, including government institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local communities. These relationships constitute complex networks that are deeply embedded within their political contexts. Humanitarian actors often operate at the

²⁶ Jakub Marcinkowski, “Humanitarian Actors’ Cooperation Network in the Social Sustainability Context. Evidence from Poland,” *Sustainability* 14, no. 9 (May 2022): 5492, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14095492>.

nexus of practical aid delivery and local power dynamics. As a result, social infrastructure is not merely technical but is fundamentally political in nature.²⁷

The political ramifications of these practices are markedly evident. Data gathered through assistance programs do not merely represent population characteristics; rather, they categorize communities into specific groups that influence access to social rights. This phenomenon exemplifies how the technical aspects of social infrastructure can serve as mechanisms for perpetuating political inequality. Global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, offer clear examples of how social assistance can be employed as a political instrument. During the pandemic, numerous governments expanded social assistance programs to alleviate the impacts of economic recession. However, as Banks highlights, non-inclusive programs frequently intensified inequality, particularly affecting individuals with disabilities who encountered additional obstacles in accessing support.²⁸ This evidence indicates that social assistance, although intended to promote welfare, can inadvertently reinforce existing exclusionary structures. The implications are unequivocal: when social assistance is not designed inclusively, it risks functioning as a tool of control that exacerbates social inequality. Conversely, when developed with consideration for diverse societal needs, social assistance can serve as a means of empowerment and the strengthening of democratic processes.

Numerous studies underscore that, for marginalized populations, social assistance often operates more as a mechanism of control than as an instrument of empowerment. Pascucci contends that social infrastructure, when influenced by political agendas, may shift its emphasis from fostering community resilience to reinforcing surveillance and control mechanisms. Comparable research demonstrates that social infrastructure is frequently mediated by political rationales, thereby diminishing community agency.²⁹ This dynamic exposes a fundamental tension inherent in the motivations behind the provision of social assistance. On one side, there exist altruistic and humanitarian intentions aimed at supporting vulnerable groups; on the other, such support can engender dependencies that are subsequently exploited for political ends.³⁰ Thus, access to essential services, such as healthcare, transcends mere welfare concerns and functions as a political tool that delineates power relations.

Urban contexts reveal an additional dimension of social assistance, specifically its intersection with infrastructure planning. In his study on urban renewal, Sha highlights that investments in urban infrastructure frequently serve strategic political objectives

²⁷ Marcinkowski, "Humanitarian Actors' Cooperation Network in the Social Sustainability Context. Evidence from Poland."

²⁸ Lena Morgon Banks et al., "Disability-Inclusive Responses to COVID-19: Lessons Learnt from Research on Social Protection in Low- and Middle-Income Countries," *World Development* 137 (January 2021): 105178, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105178>.

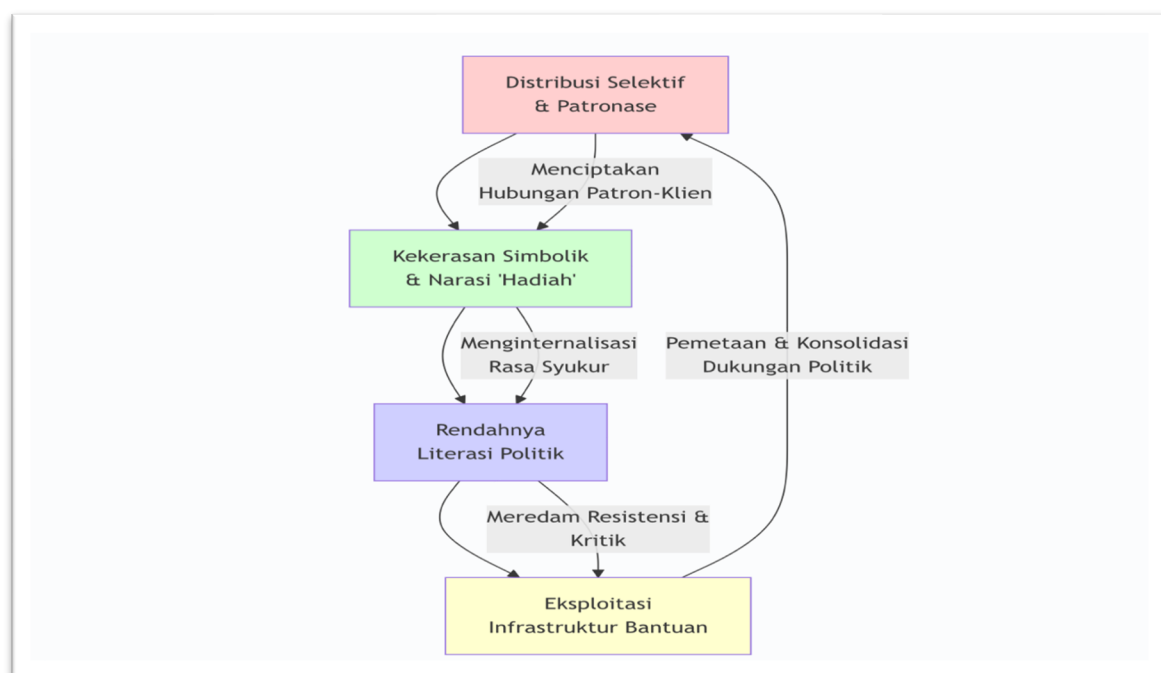
²⁹ Elisa Pascucci, "Community Infrastructures: Shelter, Self-Reliance and Polymorphic Borders in Urban Refugee Governance," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 5, no. 3 (July 2017): 332–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2017.1297252>.

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rather than solely social aims.³¹ The incorporation of social enterprises into urban planning exemplifies how political agendas influence resource allocation and community engagement. This strategic planning ultimately alters the manner in which communities interact with the state, while concurrently redefining power relations at the local level. Consequently, urban infrastructure not only shapes physical space but also functions as a political arena in which power dynamics are negotiated.

This study, grounded in a comprehensive analysis of the four mechanisms underlying the politicization of social assistance, proposes a conceptual framework that delineates the cyclical interrelations among these mechanisms. The framework not only explicates the functioning of each mechanism but, more critically, illustrates their mutual reinforcement within an ongoing cycle, thereby constituting an effective apparatus for the legitimation of power. This cyclical process can be represented as follows:

Figure 1. The Cycle of Social Assistance Politicization as a Mechanism for the Legitimation of State Power



Developed by the author through a synthesis of existing research findings.

Figure 1 presents the Cycle of Social Assistance Politicization as a Mechanism for Power Legitimation. The cycle commences with Selective Distribution, wherein the allocation of assistance is determined by political loyalty rather than objective need.

³¹ Ruimin Sha, "The Impact of Social Infrastructure Planning on the Mobility of Inclusive Theoretical Model of Aging in the Context of Urban Renewal," *SHS Web of Conferences* 163 (2023): 04013, <https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202316304013>.

This patronage-based approach is further reinforced through Symbolic Violence, characterized by the portrayal of assistance as a “gift” or an act of state “benevolence,” thereby shifting public perception from a sense of entitlement to one of gratitude.

This symbolic narrative is readily internalized in environments marked by low political literacy, thereby fostering conditions that enable manipulative practices to continue with minimal opposition. At the operational level, the exploitation of assistance infrastructure—specifically beneficiary data and distribution networks—is employed to map and monitor political support at the grassroots level. Importantly, the data and control obtained from this infrastructural exploitation (as indicated by the black arrows) create a feedback loop that enhances and facilitates selective distribution in subsequent periods. Accordingly, these four mechanisms function not merely in a sequential manner but rather constitute a self-reinforcing vicious cycle, wherein each iteration further consolidates state legitimacy while concurrently exacerbating social dependency and structural inequality within society.

Conclusion

This study concludes that social assistance, commonly perceived as a neutral expression of the state’s responsibility, functions in reality as a strategic political instrument for constructing and sustaining the legitimacy of power. Its principal contribution lies in elucidating the mechanisms underpinning the narrative of state benevolence, including patronage practices, the characterization of assistance as a “gift” that necessitates reciprocal political loyalty, and the manipulation of public dependency amid low levels of political literacy. This analysis provides insight into why social assistance programs often fail to achieve structural justice and instead perpetuate existing inequalities. From an academic standpoint, the study advances the field by synthesizing interdisciplinary perspectives, integrating Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power with the notion of politically motivated aid, thereby offering a critical framework that enhances the analysis of social policy beyond traditional technical and economic paradigms.

This study, being literature-based, possesses inherent limitations, notably the absence of direct empirical validation of its theoretical propositions in practical settings. Consequently, it should be regarded as a preliminary investigation that paves the way for subsequent research endeavors. These include empirical analyses of how communities strategically navigate the politicization of assistance, examinations of the role of digital media in either reinforcing or challenging state narratives, and comparative studies of aid politicization patterns across diverse regime types. The essential question of how to develop a rights-based social assistance system resilient to political manipulation remains an unresolved and critical issue in the advancement of substantive social justice.

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