

Mediating Public Aspirations: Institutional Filtering, Political Representation, and the Practice of Legislative Recess in Subnational Governance

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Abstract

This article examines legislative recess as a sociological mechanism that mediates public aspirations within subnational governance, challenging normative assumptions of direct political representation. While public participation is often conceptualized as a linear conduit between citizens and policymaking, this study argues that such participation is structured by institutional procedures, power relations, and administrative constraints. Focusing on legislative recess practices, the research analyzes how public aspirations are articulated, negotiated, and selectively translated into policy-relevant claims. Using a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, the study draws on participant observation of recess activities, in-depth interviews with legislators, secretariat staff, and community representatives, and analysis of official documents, including recess reports, legislative proposals, and budgetary regulations. Thematic analysis is employed to capture the institutional dynamics shaping aspiration processing. The findings demonstrate that legislative recess operates as an arena of mediated representation rather than a direct representational channel. Public aspirations are subjected to layered institutional filtering based on jurisdictional authority, budgetary feasibility, and thematic prioritization, resulting in structural selectivity. Aspirations aligned with institutional logics are more likely to be accommodated, while others are systematically marginalized without formal exclusion. The study contributes to sociological theory by reframing legislative recess as a process of institutional mediation and introduces the concepts of mediated public aspirations and institutional filtering to explain representational inequality within democratic governance, particularly in subnational contexts of the Global South.

Keywords: Democratic Governance, Institutional Filtering, Legislative Recess, Mediated Representation, Political Sociology

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INTRODUCTION

Public participation has long been positioned as a normative cornerstone of representative democracy, particularly within the discourse of local and subnational governance. Classical democratic theory assumes that citizen involvement strengthens accountability, responsiveness, and policy legitimacy by creating a communicative bridge between society and political institutions (Asimakopoulous et al., 2025; Dacombe & Wojciechowska, 2024). Within this framework, participation is often imagined as a linear process: citizens articulate their needs, representatives transmit these demands, and the state responds through policy. Yet, empirical realities of governance consistently

demonstrate that such a direct translation rarely occurs. Public aspirations are not simply conveyed from citizens to policy outcomes; rather, they are mediated through institutional procedures, power relations, and structural constraints that fundamentally shape what can be represented and how (Ansell et al., 2021; Hansen et al., 2024; Proedrou, 2022).

One institutional arena that embodies this complexity is the legislative recess. Formally designed as a mechanism for members of parliament to engage directly with constituents, legislative recess is widely portrayed as evidence of democratic closeness and responsiveness. In official narratives, recess activities are framed as moments when representatives “listen to the people,” gather public aspirations, and bring them into the legislative process. However, accumulating empirical evidence from subnational legislatures suggests a persistent discrepancy between the volume and diversity of aspirations expressed during recess sessions and the limited number of issues that ultimately materialize in policy documents and budgetary decisions (Busemeyer, 2022; Nurcahya, 2025; Radtke, 2025). This discrepancy points to an underlying process in which public aspirations are selectively processed rather than neutrally transmitted.

The importance of examining this phenomenon lies in its implications for democratic legitimacy and state–society relations. When participatory spaces are formally provided but substantively constrained, citizens may experience participation as symbolic rather than effective, generating frustration and declining trust in representative institutions (Bullock et al., 2025; Kocaoğlu & Karabulut, 2023). In many subnational contexts within the Global South, including Indonesia, these dynamics are intensified by limited fiscal capacity, fragmented authority, and entrenched bureaucratic routines that shape how aspirations are evaluated and prioritized (Sopacua et al., 2025; Sunah & Yudarta, 2025; Tuanaya, 2024). Legislative recess thus becomes a critical site where democratic promises are negotiated, adjusted, and sometimes diluted through institutional practice.

Scholarly discussions on political representation provide an important starting point for understanding these dynamics. Pitkin’s foundational work conceptualizes representation as a multifaceted relationship involving authorization, accountability, and substantive responsiveness (Afdhal, 2023; Sidiyani & Prabawati, 2025; Soselisa et al., 2024). Later developments, particularly constructivist approaches, emphasize that representation is not merely a formal relationship established through elections, but an ongoing process in which claims about “who represents whom” are continuously produced and contested (Hattu & Telussa, 2024; Moriolkosu et al., 2025; Yogi et al., 2024). These perspectives highlight that representation is enacted through practices and institutions, yet they often stop short of examining the routine mechanisms through which citizen inputs are filtered inside legislative bodies, especially at subnational levels.

Parallel to this, governance and participatory democracy literature has extensively analyzed formal participatory mechanisms such as public hearings, deliberative forums, and participatory planning processes. Arnstein’s ladder of participation remains influential in distinguishing between tokenistic and substantive forms of citizen involvement (Arnstein,

1969), while later scholars argue that institutional design is crucial in determining whether participation leads to meaningful influence (Arni, 2024; Zakiyah & Akbar, 2025). These studies convincingly show that participation does not automatically generate empowerment. However, their analytical focus largely remains on participatory forums themselves, rather than on how legislatures subsequently process, reinterpret, and institutionalize participatory outputs.

Research on decentralization and local governance further complicates this picture. Studies by Rondinelli, Crook, and Faguet suggest that decentralization can enhance responsiveness when local institutions possess adequate authority and resources (Fua & Wirantari, 2025; Lalihun et al., 2025; Pradnyani & Prabawati, 2025). In practice, however, subnational legislatures often operate within tight fiscal constraints and overlapping jurisdictions, which significantly shape their capacity to respond to citizen demands. Budgetary politics, in particular, play a decisive role in determining which aspirations are considered feasible and which are deferred or excluded (Beay et al., 2025; Hapsari & Prabawati, 2025; Manuputty et al., 2025). Despite this, legislative recess is rarely analyzed as part of these governance dynamics, instead being treated as a procedural obligation rather than a site of power.

Insights from the sociology of institutions and power offer a useful lens to interrogate this omission. Institutional theorists argue that organizations operate through routines and rules that appear neutral but systematically privilege certain interests and forms of knowledge over others (Sulaiman et al., 2024). Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power further suggests that institutional procedures can legitimize exclusion without overt coercion, making inequality appear natural and lawful (Bourdieu, 2018). Applied to legislative recess, this perspective suggests that the selection of aspirations is not simply a matter of individual discretion, but a structural outcome of institutionalized logics that define what counts as "realistic," "urgent," or "within authority."

Empirical studies on Indonesian local politics reinforce this argument. Research on regional legislatures highlights the persistence of patronage networks, budgetary bargaining, and elite dominance in shaping policy outcomes (Galuh Larasati et al., 2023; Kenawas, 2023; Sekarintias et al., 2023; Setyowati & Quist, 2022). While these studies illuminate macro-political structures, they pay limited attention to everyday legislative practices such as recess activities, where citizens directly encounter the state. As a result, an important analytical gap remains between studies of participation and studies of legislative power, leaving the mediating role of institutions underexplored.

Against this backdrop, this article approaches legislative recess not as a peripheral administrative exercise, but as a sociologically significant arena where public aspirations are transformed through institutional filtering. Rather than assuming that participation either succeeds or fails, the analysis focuses on how aspirations are processed through layers of authority, budgetary capacity, and thematic prioritization that redefine representational outcomes. By grounding the analysis in the everyday practices of a subnational legislature,

this study advances an understanding of representation as an institutionalized process of mediation rather than direct transmission.

The purpose of this research is therefore to analyze how legislative recess operates as a mechanism that mediates public aspirations within subnational governance. Through an in-depth qualitative examination of recess practices, this article seeks to explain how institutional filtering produces patterned inequalities of representation while maintaining formal democratic legitimacy. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to social and political theory by shifting analytical attention from the presence of participation to the institutional processes that shape its consequences, offering insights that are particularly relevant for understanding democracy in subnational contexts across the Global South.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive–analytical design to understand legislative recess practices as a socially constructed process mediated by institutional arrangements. The qualitative approach was chosen because the primary objective of this research is not to measure the frequency or level of success in absorbing public aspirations, but rather to trace how public aspirations are constructed, negotiated, and selected through interactions among citizens, legislators, and supporting institutions. This approach enables the researcher to capture meanings, institutional logics, and latent power relations operating within recess practices, which are difficult to explain through quantitative methods (Barroga et al., 2023; Maher & Dertadian, 2018). Accordingly, this study positions legislative recess not as an administrative variable, but as an arena of social practice imbued with interpretation and competing interests.

The research site was the Regional House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah/DPRD) of Bali Province. The selection of this site was based on sociological and analytical considerations. First, the Bali Provincial DPRD has a formally institutionalized recess mechanism that is well documented through recess reports, legislators’ statements of ideas (*pokok-pokok pikiran dewan*), and regional budgeting regulations. This condition allows the researcher to systematically trace the process of filtering public aspirations from community meetings through to their incorporation into the policy planning arena. Second, Bali, as a complex socio-political context characterized by interactions among economic interests, local cultural values, and modern governance arrangements, provides a rich empirical setting for understanding the dynamics of political representation at the subnational level, while also being relevant for the development of governance theory in the Global South (Hung et al., 2022; Yudha & Widiyarta, 2024).

Informants were selected purposively by considering their positions, experiences, and direct involvement in legislative recess practices. The primary informants consisted of nine members of the Bali Provincial DPRD who actively conducted recess activities during the research period, five DPRD Secretariat staff involved in recess administration and report preparation, and six community representatives who had conveyed aspirations during recess

activities. In total, there were twenty informants. Legislator informants were selected to explore decision-makers' perspectives and the representational claims they construct, while Secretariat staff were included to understand the administrative and procedural logics influencing the aspiration-filtering process. Community representatives were involved to capture citizens' experiences in interacting with representative institutions and their perceptions of recess outcomes. This approach aligns with qualitative principles that emphasize depth and diversity of perspectives rather than statistical representativeness (Khoa et al., 2023).

Data were collected using three complementary techniques. First, limited participant observation was conducted during several recess activities to directly observe interaction dynamics between legislators and citizens, modes of aspiration articulation, and responses provided in face-to-face settings. Second, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out to explore informants' experiences, interpretations, and institutional considerations, while allowing space for personal narratives and critical reflection (Lim, 2025). Third, document analysis was conducted on recess reports, legislators' statements of ideas, and regional planning and budgeting regulations to trace how aspirations are represented, reduced, or eliminated in official documents (Susanto et al., 2024). The combination of these methods enables a comprehensive understanding of practices, narratives, and formal structures.

To ensure data credibility, this study applied source and method triangulation. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from legislators, Secretariat staff, and community members to identify consistencies and divergences in perspectives. Method triangulation involved simultaneously linking findings from observations, interviews, and document analysis, so that conclusions did not rely on a single type of data (Kodithuwakku, 2022). Data analysis was conducted thematically through stages of open coding, categorization, and interpretation, allowing empirical findings to be linked to theoretical frameworks on political representation and institutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Legislative Recess as an Arena of Mediated Representation

As demonstrated by this study, legislative recess practices in subnational governance cannot be understood merely as technical mechanisms for absorbing public aspirations. Although normatively designed as a bridge between representatives and citizens, empirical findings indicate that recess operates as a complex arena of institutional mediation. Within this arena, public aspirations do not flow directly from citizens into policy, but instead pass through a series of formally institutionalized processes of selection, framing, and adjustment. Thus, recess is more appropriately understood as a space for the production of representation rather than merely a channel for conveying aspirations.

Institutionally, recess is a mandatory activity of the DPRD regulated by various legal frameworks, including Law Number 23 of 2014 on Regional Government and Government

Regulation Number 12 of 2018 on DPRD Rules of Procedure. In the Bali Provincial DPRD, recess is conducted for eight days during each recess period and is fully facilitated by the DPRD Secretariat, covering administrative matters, budgeting, and technical assistance (Gonçalves et al., 2024; Krivý, 2023). This fact indicates that from the outset, recess is embedded within a strict institutional framework. Aspirations emerging during recess activities are not free expressions existing outside the system, but rather occur within spaces defined by rules, schedules, report formats, and clearly delineated budgetary limits.

Findings from participant observation and interviews show that interactions during recess are both performative and selective. On the one hand, citizens are encouraged to speak, express grievances, and articulate their needs before DPRD members. Recess forums held in banjar halls or village public spaces are often perceived as spaces where “the state listens.” On the other hand, there are implicit directives regarding which types of aspirations are considered relevant and actionable. Aspirations that are overly broad, cross-sectoral, or misaligned with regional government programs are often redirected by legislators or accompanying staff into proposals deemed more “realistic” and “procedurally appropriate.” In this context, public aspirations do not appear as autonomous claims of citizens, but as raw materials that must be adjusted to the operational logic of legislative institutions.

The role of the DPRD Secretariat is particularly central in this mediation process. Empirical data indicate that the Secretariat functions not only as a technical facilitator but also as a guardian of procedural compliance. Recess administration, such as aspiration forms, activity reports, and recap mechanisms, establishes standardized formats that indirectly limit the range of aspirations that can be formally documented. Aspirations that cannot be translated into administrative formats tend to disappear from subsequent processes. The post-recess recapitulation process, which can take up to one month, demonstrates that aspiration filtering does not end at the face-to-face forum, but continues within bureaucratic spaces far removed from citizens’ reach.

These findings reinforce the view that recess constitutes an arena of mediation rather than a direct channel of representation. Conceptually, this dynamic can be understood through the representative claim-making approach (Febriadi et al., 2025; Maulana et al., 2022). From this perspective, representation is seen as a process of claim construction occurring within institutional spaces, where political actors actively frame who is represented, what is represented, and in what form claims are articulated. Recess thus becomes a crucial moment in the production of representational claims. DPRD members do not merely “listen” to aspirations; they also interpret, filter, and reframe them to align with jurisdictional boundaries, budgetary capacities, and institutional thematic priorities.

The representation produced through recess is not a direct reflection of citizens’ needs, but the outcome of negotiations between public aspirations and institutional logics. This explains why some aspirations are incorporated into legislators’ statements of ideas, while others are eliminated without explicit rejection. This process unfolds legally, routinely, and with formal legitimacy, so that resulting representational inequalities are often perceived

not as structural problems but as technical limitations.

To clarify this mediation mechanism, Table 1 summarizes the main stages of recess practices as an arena of institutional mediation based on the study's findings.

Table 1 Legislative Recess as an Arena of Institutional Mediation of Public Aspirations

Recess Practice Stage	Dominant Actors	Aspiration Mediation Process	Impact on Representation
Face-to-face recess forum	Legislators, community members	Aspirations directed toward issues deemed relevant and realistic	Aspirations begin to be reframed
Administration and facilitation	DPRD Secretariat	Standardization of aspirations through report formats	Reduction in aspiration diversity
Post-recess recapitulation	Session and finance staff	Selection based on authority and feasibility	Certain aspirations eliminated
Integration into official documents	Legislators and institutions	Alignment with formal agendas and procedures	Selective representation

Source: Compiled from observations, interviews, and document analysis of Bali Provincial DPRD recess activities, 2025

Through this lens, recess can no longer be understood as a neutral space of participation, but as a practice of power operating through administrative and symbolic procedures. On the one hand, recess strengthens the political legitimacy of DPRD members as representatives who are present and attentive to citizens. On the other hand, it also functions as a mechanism that systematically limits the extent to which citizens' aspirations can influence policy. This tension between symbolic legitimacy and substantive selectivity renders recess a key arena for understanding political representation at the subnational level.

The timing of recess implementation varies across provinces according to decisions made by the Deliberative Body (Badan Musyawarah/Banmus) of each Provincial DPRD. The recess schedule of the Bali Provincial DPRD differs from that of city or regency DPRD within Bali Province. This variation arises from differing policies of each DPRD Secretariat in determining recess schedules. Nevertheless, such variations are permissible as long as they do not violate regulations requiring recess to be conducted three times within one year.

Recess activities begin with meetings to determine the start and end dates of the recess period, conducted by the DPRD Secretariat together with DPRD members. These internal meetings are held twice prior to the recess. The first meeting focuses on planning and preparation, while the second involves the distribution of administrative documents to accompanying staff and instructions for completing the required administration. The preparation stage includes administrative arrangements, budgeting, and assignment of accompanying staff. Required administrative documents include recess forms, notification letters to subdistrict heads, and expenditure receipts. Recess funding derives from the Regional Revenue and Expenditure Budget (APBD) as proposed by the DPRD. The budget

allocation is calculated based on several components. The first component is the recess allowance for DPRD members, provided as compensation for their working days during the recess period. The second component includes official travel expenses, food and beverage costs, and venue rental fees, which support the implementation of recess activities at locations chosen by DPRD members. Recess activities are conducted in areas selected by each DPRD member, typically in banjar halls or other available village facilities.



Figure 2. Documentation of DPRD Members with Community Members During Recess Activities

Source: Session and Facilitation Division, Secretariat of the Bali Provincial DPRD

After the conclusion of the recess period, accompanying staff submit all recess-related documents to be recapitulated by staff from the session and finance divisions. This recapitulation process takes approximately one month following the end of the recess period. Once the recess period concludes, the DPRD enters the session period again, and members resume their regular duties in accordance with their institutional responsibilities.

Constructing Public Aspirations: From Lived Problems to Policy-Compatible Claims

Public aspirations articulated during legislative recess activities fundamentally originate from citizens' everyday lived experiences. In recess forums held in balai banjar or village public spaces, residents generally express concrete and proximate concerns, such as damaged neighborhood roads, delays in administrative services, difficulties in accessing social assistance, or the need for small-scale communal facilities. These aspirations are not necessarily conveyed in policy-oriented language, but rather through experiential narratives, personal complaints, and normative expectations regarding the presence of the state. The findings of this study indicate that, at this initial stage, public aspirations remain highly

contextual, particularistic, and embedded in the social spaces in which citizens live.

However, for these aspirations to enter the institutional processes of the DPRD, they must undergo transformation. This process does not occur automatically, but rather through the active intervention of institutional actors, particularly DPRD members and Secretariat staff accompanying recess activities. In practice, legislators often direct citizens to “focus” their aspirations, simplify demands, or link them to existing programs. Accompanying staff play a role in summarizing aspirations into predetermined administrative formats, such as recess forms or legislators’ statements of ideas. As a result, citizens’ aspirations gradually shift from experiential narratives to claims that can be processed administratively.

This transformation reflects what is understood in the institutional sense-making perspective as a process of meaning construction within institutions (Meiryani & Isa, 2019). Institutions do not passively receive social reality; rather, they actively interpret and categorize it to align with internal rules, procedures, and operational logics. In the context of recess, public aspirations are not eliminated, but reinterpreted to become compatible with regional planning and budgeting systems. This process explains why aspirations that are initially complex and multidimensional often appear in official documents as brief, technical, and fragmented proposals.

Empirical data show that the translation of aspirations frequently involves significant simplification. For example, citizens’ complaints about difficulties in accessing health services due to a combination of distance, cost, and information barriers are often reduced in recess reports to proposals such as “improving health facilities” or “provision of supporting infrastructure.” This reduction is not merely the result of indifference, but rather a consequence of institutional needs to fit aspirations into available policy categories. Aspirations that cannot be translated into such categories tend to be poorly documented and are at risk of disappearing from subsequent processes.

The role of the DPRD Secretariat is decisive at this stage. As demonstrated by data from the implementation of recess activities in the Bali Provincial DPRD, the Secretariat is responsible for administration, recapitulation, and post-recess document processing, which can take up to one month after field activities conclude. At this stage, summarized aspirations are further selected based on administrative completeness, conformity with provincial authority, and their potential for integration into planning documents. This process illustrates how institutions operate as “meaning-making machines” that standardize aspirations so they can be processed bureaucratically.

To clarify this transformation mechanism, Table 2 presents examples of patterns in the shift of public aspirations from lived experiences to institutionally compatible policy claims.

Table 2. Transformation of Public Aspirations in Legislative Recess Practices

Initial Form of Aspiration (Lived Problems)	Institutional Process	Form of Aspiration in Official Documents
Damaged neighborhood roads endangering children	Simplification and technical categorization	Proposal for road infrastructure improvement
Difficulties in processing social assistance administration	Alignment with existing programs	Optimization of regional social services
Lack of public spaces for community activities	Adjustment to budgetary schemes	Provision of village public facilities

Source: Compiled from observations, interviews, and document analysis of Bali Provincial DPRD recess activities, 2025

Through this process, public aspirations undergo a shift in meaning. The emotional, historical, and social dimensions of citizens' experiences are often reduced, while technical and administrative aspects are emphasized. From an institutional perspective, this process is necessary to maintain order and policy feasibility. However, from a sociological perspective, it creates a gap between citizens' lived experiences and their policy representations. The resulting representations become more "manageable" and administratively neat, but less reflective of the social complexities that underpin them.

These findings underscore that the construction of public aspirations is an integral part of institutional power practices. Aspirations are not openly rejected, but are reshaped through routine interactions between actors and rules. In this context, political representation cannot be understood as a direct mirror of popular will, but rather as the outcome of layered adjustment processes occurring within institutions. The institutional sense-making approach helps explain how these processes unfold in legitimate and sanctioned ways, while also clarifying why representational inequalities can emerge without overt conflict.

Jurisdictional Filtering: Authority as the First Layer of Selection

The first layer of institutional filtering in legislative recess practices is authority. The findings of this study indicate that from the earliest stages of aspiration processing, the primary question posed by institutional actors is not the degree of a problem's social urgency, but whether the issue falls within the authority of the DPRD and the provincial government. Public aspirations related to issues spanning multiple levels of government, such as village, regency/municipal, or even ministerial jurisdictions, are systematically filtered out of subsequent processes. This filtering occurs routinely, is institutionally embedded, and is rarely questioned, thereby becoming part of the bureaucratic "common sense" of aspiration management.

Based on an analysis of Bali Provincial DPRD recess reports, many aspirations are explicitly annotated as "outside provincial authority" or "within the domain of regency/municipal government." Such labeling functions as an administrative mechanism

that simultaneously serves as an initial filter. Aspirations marked in this way are generally not advanced to deliberation stages within DPRD bodies nor integrated into legislators' statements of ideas. Authority thus acts as the first gatekeeper determining whether an aspiration is deemed eligible for further consideration within the provincial policy arena.

Field findings further show that this authority-based filtering process is rarely communicated transparently to citizens. In many observed recess activities, citizens were encouraged to convey all of their aspirations without detailed explanations of the limits of provincial legislative authority. When these aspirations later failed to appear in policy follow-up, citizens often received no adequate clarification regarding the institutional reasons for their exclusion. Consequently, jurisdictional boundaries operate as an invisible yet highly consequential selection mechanism shaping representational outcomes.

From a sociological perspective, authority cannot be understood merely as an administrative division of labor. These findings demonstrate that authority functions as a political mechanism determining which aspirations are considered legitimate and worthy of representation. Aspirations falling outside formal jurisdictional boundaries are not assessed based on their public importance, but are redefined as "irrelevant" to the institution. In this sense, authority becomes an instrument of power that shapes the horizon of possible political representation, rather than a neutral technical rule.

The institutional boundary-making approach helps explain this dynamic. Poljašević et al. (2025) and Sambodo et al. (2023) emphasize that institutional boundaries are not merely administrative lines, but socially and politically constructed outcomes continuously reproduced through everyday practices. These boundaries determine what may enter decision-making arenas and what must remain outside. In legislative recess practices, jurisdictional boundaries serve as a means for institutions to maintain stability and order, while simultaneously filtering demands that might disrupt established operational logics.

Interviews with DPRD members and Secretariat staff reveal that many institutional actors are aware of these limitations, yet regard them as unavoidable consequences of a tiered governance system. They frequently emphasize that aspirations outside provincial authority "cannot be processed," even while personally acknowledging the importance of these issues for citizens. Such statements indicate a separation between personal empathy and institutional capacity. In practice, this empathy has little space to be translated into representative action when it conflicts with formal jurisdictional limits.

This situation illustrates how authority operates as a mechanism of depoliticization. Public aspirations are not rejected on normative or ideological grounds, but are neutralized through technical-administrative language. By stating that an aspiration lies "outside authority," institutions shift the issue from the political realm to the procedural realm. This process renders filtering decisions seemingly objective and legitimate, while simultaneously foreclosing debate over representational responsibility across levels of government (Poljašević et al., 2025; Sambodo et al., 2023).

Furthermore, these findings indicate that jurisdictional boundaries structurally produce representational inequalities. Citizens residing in areas with complex, cross-sectoral problems are more likely to articulate aspirations that exceed a single level of government, and such aspirations have a lower likelihood of being accommodated within provincial recess mechanisms. Conversely, aspirations that align from the outset with provincial authority are more readily translated into policy proposals.

Budgetary Filtering: Fiscal Rationality and the Hierarchy of Feasibility

The second layer in the institutional filtering of public aspirations within legislative recess practices is budgetary capacity. The findings of this study indicate that once an aspiration is deemed to fall within the authority of the provincial government, the next immediate consideration is fiscal feasibility. At this stage, aspirations are no longer assessed primarily on the basis of social urgency or their potential impact on citizens' welfare, but rather on whether the demands can be accommodated within available budgetary limits and established regional financial planning schemes. Budgetary considerations thus function as a second, decisive selection mechanism that further constrains the space of representation previously filtered through jurisdictional authority.

An analysis of recess reports and interviews with DPRD members and Secretariat staff reveals a consistent pattern: aspirations requiring large budget allocations, cross-sectoral coordination, or long-term financing commitments tend to be categorized as "not yet feasible" or "requiring further study." While such formulations appear neutral and rational, in practice they often result in indefinite postponement or the quiet removal of these aspirations from the policy agenda. Conversely, aspirations that are small in scale, require limited funding, and can be accommodated within existing expenditure categories are more readily accepted and recorded as concrete follow-up actions.

These findings demonstrate that fiscal logic produces a hierarchy of aspiration feasibility. Aspirations are not treated equally as expressions of public need, but are instead positioned within a priority order based on their compatibility with regional fiscal constraints. In many observed cases, structural issues such as equitable access to public services, strategic infrastructure development, or the strengthening of community social capacity are marginalized because they are considered "too costly" or "unrealistic" within an annual fiscal framework. By contrast, short-term, incremental, and patchwork solutions are more likely to gain representational traction.

In interviews, legislators frequently stated that budgetary constraints are an unavoidable reality. They emphasized that public aspirations must be adjusted to regional fiscal capacity in order to avoid generating unrealistic expectations. Such statements reflect a strong internalization of what may be termed fiscal rationality, a mode of reasoning that positions budgetary discipline as the primary principle guiding policy decision-making. Within this framework, the budget is not merely a technical instrument, but a dominant rationality shaping how actors understand the possibilities and limits of political representation (Adeoye et al., 2021).

However, field findings also indicate that this fiscal rationality is rarely debated openly with citizens. In recess forums, discussions of budgetary issues are typically simplified or even avoided altogether. Citizens often receive little detailed explanation as to why certain aspirations are deemed fiscally unfeasible or how budgetary decisions are made. As a result, fiscal limits operate as an implicit yet highly effective selection mechanism in determining the fate of public aspirations. Aspirations are not explicitly rejected, but rather “deferred” or “reconsidered,” language that obscures decisions of exclusion.

Conceptually, these findings align with the view that budgeting constitutes a concealed arena of politics. Shandryk et al. (2024) argue that in modern governance, budgetary decisions are among the most powerful instruments for shaping public policy direction. Through the allocation of resources, institutions not only determine which programs are implemented, but also define which needs are recognized as collective priorities. In the context of legislative recess, the budget functions as a filter that transforms citizens’ aspirations into competing claims assessed through the logic of fiscal feasibility.

Moreover, this process produces structurally embedded representational inequalities. Communities with complex and resource-intensive needs, such as disadvantaged regions, groups facing multidimensional social problems, or communities requiring cross-sectoral interventions, are placed at a relative disadvantage. Their aspirations are less likely to pass through the fiscal filtering layer, not due to a lack of social legitimacy, but because they do not align with predefined budgetary constraints. In contrast, groups with simpler and more easily financed needs enjoy greater opportunities for representation.

Within the analytical framework of this article, budgetary capacity cannot be understood as a merely technical constraint, but rather as an institutional mechanism that produces hierarchies of aspiration. It establishes a legitimate, normalized, and rarely contested logic of selection, through which representational inequalities appear as “natural” consequences of limited resources. Accordingly, fiscal filtering reinforces the argument that legislative recess functions as an arena of mediation, where public aspirations are not directly translated into policy, but are filtered through institutional rationalities that prioritize fiscal stability over social urgency.

These findings underscore that political representation in subnational governance contexts is shaped not only by citizens’ preferences or legislators’ commitments, but also by budgetary structures that define what is possible and what is not. By placing the budget at the center of analysis, this article invites readers to view legislative recess practices as politically charged processes imbued with hidden normative decisions, in which fiscal boundaries serve as a primary instrument for translating public aspirations into institutionally “feasible” policies.

Thematic Prioritization: Aligning Aspirations with Institutional Agendas

The third layer of institutional filtering in legislative recess practices is thematic prioritization. Even after public aspirations pass jurisdictional and fiscal thresholds, the selection process does not end. The findings of this study show that at the subsequent stage,

aspirations must still be aligned with dominant thematic agendas within legislative institutions and regional government. At this point, the key question shifts from “Is this aspiration processable?” to “Is this aspiration relevant to the prioritized agenda?” Thematic prioritization thus functions as a more subtle yet equally decisive layer of selection in shaping political representation.

An analysis of recess reports and regional development planning documents indicates that aspirations related to broad themes such as infrastructure development, tourism, poverty alleviation, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), or the strengthening of the creative economy are more likely to reappear as formal recommendations. These themes align with prevailing regional development narratives and flagship provincial programs, making them easier to position as part of broader collective goals. By contrast, aspirations that are specific, localized, or concern minority groups, such as the needs of particular customary communities, socially unpopular issues, or everyday concerns lacking symbolic development value, tend to lose visibility in subsequent stages.

Field findings suggest that this process is not always explicit. In many cases, legislators and Secretariat staff actively “assist” citizens by steering their aspirations toward themes considered strategic. Aspirations that are initially highly local or personal are reformulated in broader development-oriented language, for example by linking them to poverty reduction programs or community welfare enhancement. While this practice is often understood as facilitative support, it simultaneously illustrates how institutional agendas delineate the boundaries of articulable aspirations.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings are consistent with the agenda-setting approach in institutional politics. Márton (2021) emphasizes that political institutions do not merely respond to external demands, but actively construct what is considered important through processes of selection, framing, and issue repetition. Agendas do not emerge neutrally; they are produced through interactions among actors, structures, and dominant narratives. In the context of legislative recess, this dynamic is evident in the fact that public aspirations gain representational opportunities only when they can be situated within institutionally recognized agenda frameworks.

Recess thus functions as an initial space of agenda production. Citizens’ aspirations serve as raw material that is subsequently filtered and adjusted to reinforce, or at least not contradict, existing agendas. Aspirations that cannot be integrated into dominant themes are rarely rejected outright; instead, they are left to stagnate without follow-up. This process creates an illusion of inclusivity, everyone is allowed to speak, while simultaneously maintaining institutional control over which issues are deemed worthy of advocacy.

Interviews with DPRD members reveal that many legislators view thematic alignment as a pragmatic strategy to increase the likelihood that aspirations will be realized. They argue that linking aspirations to flagship programs enhances their chances of entering planning and budgeting processes. However, this pragmatic rationality carries important sociological consequences. Aspirations that do not resonate with dominant development narratives lose

bargaining power, even when they are socially urgent for specific groups.

In this context, thematic prioritization operates as a mechanism of normalization. It defines what counts as a “public problem” and what is reduced to a private or marginal concern. Minority aspirations or politically unpopular issues often lack a thematic “language” compatible with institutional agendas, making them easier to exclude. This reinforces representational inequalities, not through overt rejection, but through selection processes that appear rational and legitimate.

Furthermore, these findings indicate that thematic prioritization closely interacts with the two preceding layers of filtering. Aspirations that fall within jurisdictional authority and are fiscally feasible may still be marginalized if they do not align with prioritized thematic agendas. Political representation in recess practices is therefore not the result of a single decision, but the cumulative outcome of mutually reinforcing selection processes. Thematic prioritization serves as the final layer ensuring that only certain aspirations ultimately emerge as recognized representational claims.

Within the broader argument of this article, thematic filtering confirms that legislative recess is a highly structured arena of mediation. It is not merely a meeting space between representatives and citizens, but also a mechanism of agenda production that reproduces dominant development narratives. By positioning agenda-setting at the center of analysis, this subsection reinforces the claim that political representation in subnational governance is neither neutral nor direct, but is shaped by institutional logics that determine which issues are seen, heard, and pursued.

Structural Selectivity and the Production of Unequal Representation

This subsection integrates the three layers of filtering, authority, budgetary capacity, and thematic prioritization, into a single mechanism that can be understood as structural selectivity in legislative recess practices. The findings demonstrate that public aspirations are never processed within a neutral or egalitarian space. From the outset, aspirations move along an institutional trajectory predetermined by the rules, procedures, and operational logics of subnational governance. It is within this trajectory that representational inequality is produced, not through the arbitrary decisions of individual legislators, but through mechanisms that are legitimate, routine, and institutionalized.

Empirical analysis shows that many aspirations “fall away” without ever encountering an explicit moment of rejection. These aspirations are neither declared invalid nor openly debated; instead, they gradually lose opportunities for continuation because they fail to meet one or more institutional criteria. At the level of authority, aspirations are excluded for falling outside the jurisdiction of the provincial government. At the budgetary stage, they are assessed as fiscally unrealistic. At the thematic stage, they fail to find a place within the dominant development agenda. This process generates a subtle form of exclusion in which representational inequality emerges without open conflict and without a clearly identifiable actor to blame.

In this context, structural selectivity operates as a multilayered filtering mechanism whose components mutually reinforce one another. Each layer appears rational when considered independently; however, when combined, they form a selection system that systematically advantages certain aspirations while marginalizing others. Aspirations that align with institutional logics, whether in terms of authority, fiscal feasibility, or agenda compatibility, have a higher probability of being elevated as representational claims. Conversely, aspirations originating from vulnerable groups, involving cross-sectoral issues, or deviating from dominant development narratives tend to be gradually eliminated.

These findings underscore that political representation in legislative recess practices cannot be reduced to a simple relationship between representatives and constituents. Representation is the outcome of complex interactions between actors and structures, in which institutions play an active role in defining the boundaries of representability. This perspective aligns with neo-institutional approaches that conceptualize institutions not merely as formal rules, but as configurations of meaning, practice, and power that shape political action (Reskino & Darma, 2023). Within this framework, selectivity is not a deviation from democracy, but an inherent feature of how institutions operate.

The conceptualization of mediated public aspirations is central to understanding this dynamic. Public participation formally continues, citizens attend, speak, and voice their concerns, yet the outcomes of that participation are mediated in such a way that not all aspirations carry equal representational weight. Aspirations do not disappear; rather, they are processed, filtered, and ranked through legitimate procedures. Consequently, representational inequality does not emerge as the absence of participation, but as differentiated outcomes produced through the same participatory process.

From a political sociology perspective, these findings extend discussions of representational inequality by demonstrating that exclusion does not always occur through coercive or visibly discriminatory mechanisms. Inequality can be produced through procedures that are legal, normalized, and even perceived as “appropriate” by institutional actors. Legislators and secretariat staff in this study frequently interpreted selection processes as expressions of administrative responsibility and policy efficiency rather than as practices of exclusion. Yet this is precisely where the power of structural selectivity lies: it operates without needing to be acknowledged as injustice.

Furthermore, these findings help explain why recess practices simultaneously generate public legitimacy and public disappointment. On the one hand, recess creates a symbolic space in which the state is seen to be present and attentive to citizens, thereby reinforcing images of representation and political proximity. On the other hand, when aspirations remain unrealized without transparent explanation, citizens experience frustration and an erosion of trust. This tension is not merely the result of communication failure, but of an institutional design that allows aspirations to “disappear” along the process without explicit accountability.

By synthesizing the three layers of filtering into a single mechanism of structural selectivity, this subsection articulates the article's main theoretical contribution. Political representation must be understood as an institutionally mediated process in which inequality can be routinely produced through legitimate practices. This approach shifts the analytical focus from normative questions of whether participation occurs to sociological questions of how participation is processed and with what consequences. In the context of subnational governance, particularly in the Global South, this perspective opens new analytical space for understanding democracy not only through its formal procedures, but through the everyday institutional practices that shape the actual boundaries of representation.

CONCLUSION

This article addresses its research objective by demonstrating that legislative recess practices in subnational governance cannot be understood as mechanisms of direct representation, but rather as processes of institutional mediation that systematically shape, filter, and transform public aspirations. Based on qualitative analysis of recess practices in the Bali Provincial DPRD, the study shows that citizens' aspirations do not move linearly from participatory spaces into policy outcomes. Instead, they must pass through a series of layered filters, authority, budgetary capacity, and thematic prioritization, that operate legitimately, routinely, and often beyond citizens' awareness. Through these mechanisms, representational inequality is produced not as a result of individual legislators' intentions or failures, but as a consequence of the institutional design and governing logics of subnational government itself. By developing the concepts of mediated public aspirations and institutional filtering of aspirations, this study offers a theoretical contribution to understanding political representation as a structurally mediated process in which participation persists while representational outcomes remain unequal. These findings enrich political sociology and governance studies by shifting analytical attention from the mere presence of participation to the ways institutions process and reproduce public aspirations, while underscoring the importance of interpreting local democracy through the everyday institutional practices that define the actual limits of representation.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles, including informed consent, protection of informants' confidentiality, and respect for local cultural values. Special consideration was given to participants from vulnerable groups to ensure their safety, comfort, and equal rights to participate. No external funding was received, and the authors declare no conflict of interest. All data and information presented were collected through valid research methods and have been verified to ensure their accuracy and reliability. The use of artificial intelligence (AI) was limited to technical assistance for writing and language editing, without influencing the scientific substance of the work. The authors express their gratitude to the informants for their valuable insights, and to the anonymous

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