

## Welfare Policy and Electoral Preferences: Public Perceptions of the MBG Program in Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines public perceptions of the Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program in the Special Region of Yogyakarta in the context of the 2029 General Election. Using a quantitative survey of 200 student respondents selected through purposive sampling, the study measures three dimensions, namely perceived benefits, targeting accuracy, and political relevance. The findings reveal substantial public scepticism toward the program. A majority of respondents question its effectiveness, 67.5% express doubt about its benefits, and 70% perceive the program as inaccurately targeted. In addition, 65% of respondents associate the program with political interests, particularly in image-building and electoral mobilisation. These results indicate that their functional performance does not solely shape perceptions of welfare policies, but is also shaped by the broader political context in which they are implemented. The study argues that implementation shortcomings, especially in targeting and distribution, contribute to the politicisation of welfare programs. By shifting the analytical focus from voting behaviour to perception as a socio-political construct, this study contributes to the development of political perception theory within welfare politics. It demonstrates that, in a developing democracy, welfare policies are interpreted as political signals rather than purely social interventions.

### Keywords

*Welfare Policy, Public Perception, MBG Program, Electoral Politics*

## Introduction

In the development of contemporary electoral democracy, welfare policy is increasingly positioned not only as an instrument of economic distribution but also as part of a political strategy in electoral competition (Sumarto & McCarthy, 2026). The literature on welfare politics emphasises that the expansion of social programs is often driven by the political need to secure public support within a democratic system (Enggist et al., 2026). In this context, welfare policy becomes a crucial arena that connects the interests of the state, society, and political actors in the electoral process (Nemčok et al., 2026).

The relationship between welfare policies and electoral politics is becoming increasingly evident in developing democracies, including Indonesia (Sumarto & McCarthy, 2026). Electoral competition drives political actors to utilise social programs to mobilise voter support (Achmad, 2024). This indicates that welfare policies cannot be separated from the dynamics of power and political strategies in democracy (Hakim et al., 2025). Within this framework, public perception becomes a key element in understanding how welfare policies are interpreted in a political context (Błaszczynski & Nowakowski, 2025). The political perception approach emphasises that the public does not merely accept policies objectively but interprets them through their experiences, information, and the surrounding political context (Nemčok et al., 2026). Therefore, public perception is a social construction that reflects the interaction between policies and political dynamics (Hummler & Vierus, 2025).

Public perception of policies is also heavily influenced by framing and the information environment that develops in the public sphere (Nemčok et al., 2026). The media and political actors play a crucial role in shaping narratives regarding the objectives and meaning of policies (Chan & Yi, 2024). Consequently, the same policy can be perceived differently depending on how the information is constructed and disseminated (Błaszczynski & Nowakowski, 2025). In the context of electoral democracy, public perception has important implications for political legitimacy and the stability of the democratic system (Frantz et al., 2025). Perceptions of public policy can influence public trust in government and political institutions (Hummler & Vierus, 2025). Thus, understanding public perception is essential for explaining the dynamics of the relationship between policy and politics in a democracy.

As an electoral democracy, Indonesia exhibits complex dynamics in the relationship between welfare policies and public perception (Achmad, 2024). Social assistance programs are often perceived not only as public policies but also as part of political strategies leading up to elections (Sumarto & McCarthy, 2026). This indicates an ambiguity in how the public interprets welfare policies within an electoral context. Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program is one welfare policy relevant for examination within this framework. As a program focused on meeting basic needs, MBG has the potential to foster positive perceptions of the government.

However, in the context of the lead-up to the 2029 elections, this program also risks being interpreted as part of an electoral strategy.

From the perspective of welfare politics, MBG can be understood as a form of social policy that has political dimensions in its implementation (Enggist et al., 2026). Meanwhile, within the framework of political perception, public perception of this program is influenced by direct experience, information, and the evolving political context (Błaszczycński & Nowakowski, 2025). Therefore, an analysis of public perception is crucial for understanding how the policy is interpreted within an electoral context.

This study was conducted in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, which possesses relatively unique socio-political characteristics compared to other regions in Indonesia. The high level of education and political awareness among the population makes this region a relevant context for examining public perceptions of welfare policies. Thus, research in this region is expected to provide a more insightful picture of the dynamics of political perceptions within an electoral democracy. Based on this description, this study aims to analyse how the public perceives the MBG program in relation to the 2029 General Election. Unlike previous studies that focused on the impact of policies on voting behaviour, this study emphasises the dimension of perception as a socio-political construct. This study is expected to make a theoretical contribution to the development of research on welfare politics and political perception within the context of electoral democracy in Indonesia.

Despite the growing body of literature on *welfare politics* and electoral dynamics, existing studies have predominantly focused on voting behaviour and electoral outcomes rather than on how the public interprets welfare policies before political decision-making. In many cases, citizens are positioned as passive recipients of policy impacts, while the interpretive dimension of public perception remains underexplored. Furthermore, in the context of developing democracies such as Indonesia, limited attention has been paid to how implementation challenges and public distrust shape perceptions of welfare policies as political instruments. This gap is particularly relevant in understanding how social policies are constructed as political signals within electoral competition.

This study addresses this gap by positioning public perception as a central analytical lens in examining the relationship between welfare policy and electoral politics. By focusing on how the MBG program is interpreted within the context of the 2029 General Election, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of *political perception* as a socio-political construct. In doing so, it contributes to the *welfare politics* literature by highlighting the role of perception in shaping the political meaning of social policies in a developing democracy.

## Method

This study employs a quantitative, survey-based approach to analyse public perceptions of Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program in the context of the 2029 General Election in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The survey approach was chosen because it is effective for systematically measuring public perceptions, attitudes, and opinions among large numbers of respondents and allows limited generalisation of findings (Creswell, John W; Creswell, 2018). Additionally, quantitative methods are relevant for identifying patterns of public perception within the context of contemporary policy and politics (Liu et al., 2021). The study population consists of students residing in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The sample comprised 200 respondents, selected using purposive sampling, who were eligible voters and aware of the MBG program. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that respondents were relevant to the research issue and capable of providing information aligned with the study's objectives (Dewar et al., 2019). The selection of university students is based on the assumption that this group represents politically aware individuals with relatively high levels of information exposure, making them suitable for capturing reflective political perceptions rather than purely experiential responses. However, this sampling approach also limits the generalisability of the findings to the broader population.

Data were collected via an online questionnaire distributed via a digital platform. The research instrument used a three-point Likert scale to measure respondents' level of agreement with various statements. The Likert scale is one of the most commonly used measurement techniques in survey research because it has high reliability for measuring attitudes and perceptions (Creswell, John W; Creswell, 2018). The main variable in this study is public perception of the MBG program, which was operationalized into three indicators: perceptions of the program's benefits, its targeting accuracy, and its relevance to the political context. Variable operationalization is necessary to transform abstract concepts into indicators that can be empirically measured (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2021). Although a three-point Likert scale was used to simplify response patterns and reduce respondent fatigue, it may limit response variability. Future research is therefore encouraged to adopt a five or seven-point scale to capture more nuanced perceptions.

The research instruments were tested for validity and reliability before data collection. The validity test aimed to ensure that the survey items measured the intended construct, while the reliability test assessed the instruments' internal consistency. These tests are crucial steps in quantitative research to ensure data quality. The validity test results show that all items meet the acceptable threshold, with Corrected Item-Total Correlation values ranging from 0.612 to 0.701, indicating that all items are statistically valid. The reliability test yields a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.728, exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70, confirming acceptable internal consistency. The data analysis technique used is descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, and mean values to describe patterns in

respondents' perceptions. Descriptive analysis is widely used in survey research to provide an overview of the data without testing for causal relationships (Nor Roselidyawaty Mohd Rokeman, 2024). To strengthen the analytical dimension, additional cross-tabulation analyses were conducted to explore the relationships among key variables, particularly between perceived targeting accuracy and political relevance.

In addition, cross-tabulation was used to examine the distribution of perceptions by respondent characteristics. This technique allows researchers to systematically identify variations in data across groups in quantitative research (Astuti et al., 2024). With this approach, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of public perceptions of the MBG program in the context of the 2029 General Election. A survey-based quantitative approach also allows for systematic and scientifically accountable data interpretation. This study also adheres to ethical research standards. All respondents participated voluntarily and provided informed consent prior to completing the questionnaire, and their anonymity and confidentiality were fully maintained throughout the research process.

## Result and Discussion

This section discusses research findings regarding public perceptions of the Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program in the context of the 2029 General Election in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. The discussion focuses on how the public interprets the program across three main dimensions: perceptions of its benefits, its targeting accuracy, and its connection to the electoral political context. These three dimensions are analysed to understand how welfare policies are evaluated not only based on technical and functional aspects but also within a broader social and political framework. While the results section primarily presents descriptive findings, the discussion section extends the analysis by interpreting these patterns within broader theoretical frameworks, particularly welfare politics and political perception. This approach ensures that the findings are not merely descriptive but analytically meaningful.

Consistent with the abstract's findings, the research results indicate that public perceptions of the MBG are diverse and not uniform. Some respondents view the program as a form of welfare policy that provides tangible benefits to the community. In contrast, others associate it with a political agenda ahead of the 2029 General Election. This situation demonstrates that perceptions of public policy cannot be separated from the surrounding electoral context.

Within the framework of welfare politics and political perception, this discussion aims to elaborate on how the public interprets the MBG policy within the dynamics of electoral democracy. Thus, this section not only presents an interpretation of the empirical findings but also relates them to relevant theoretical frameworks to explain the complexity of the relationship between welfare policies

and public political perceptions. Furthermore, the discussion will be broken down into three main subsections that reflect the dimensions of this study's analysis.

Before presenting the main findings in detail, the measurement instrument's validity and reliability were assessed to ensure the robustness of the data. The validity test using the Corrected Item-Total Correlation (CITC) shows that all items exceed the acceptable threshold ( $r > 0.30$ ), indicating that each item accurately measures the intended constructs. Among the three items, the statement regarding political relevance shows the highest correlation, followed by targeting accuracy and perceived benefits. This suggests that respondents exhibit a more consistent perception when evaluating the political dimension of the MBG program.

**Table 1.** Validity Test Results

Statement (Short Description)	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Decision
Nutritional benefit perception	0.612	Valid
Targeting accuracy perception	0.655	Valid
Political relevance perception	0.701	Valid

Furthermore, the reliability test using Cronbach's Alpha yields a value above the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. This result confirms that the three items used in this study are reliable and consistently capture public perceptions across the measured dimensions. The robustness of these results provides a strong empirical foundation for interpreting subsequent findings, particularly the patterns indicating low perceived benefits, scepticism about targeting accuracy, and the strong association of the program with political interests ahead of the 2029 election.

**Table 2.** Reliability Test Result

Variable Set	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
All Items	3	0.728	Reliable

In addition to confirming measurement robustness, these results strengthen the credibility of subsequent interpretations, particularly in explaining the consistency of respondents' perceptions across the three analytical dimensions.

### 1. The Benefits of the MBG Program within the Framework of Welfare Politics

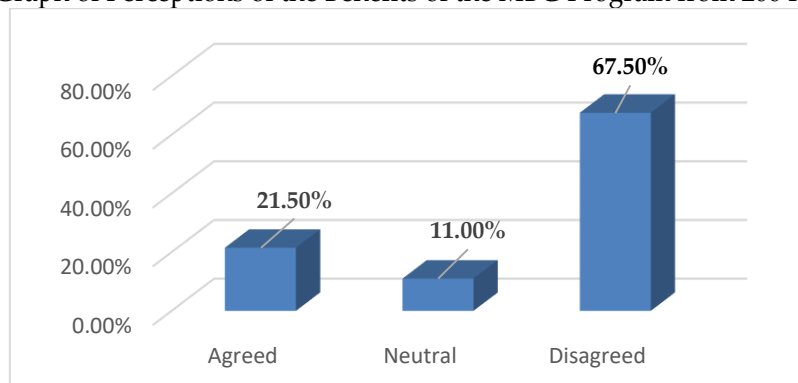
Public perceptions of the benefits of Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program indicate that this policy is generally accepted as a form of government intervention aimed at improving public welfare. The results of this study show that some respondents view the MBG as a policy that provides direct benefits, particularly in meeting basic needs such as nutrition and health. These findings align with recent literature suggesting that welfare-based policies tend to gain public legitimacy when they provide concrete benefits directly felt by the public (Busemenyer & Garritzmann, 2019).

In the context of welfare politics, the benefits of a program are among the key factors shaping the public's positive perception of public policy. Distributive policies such as the MBG are viewed not only as economic instruments but also as symbols of the state's presence in citizens' social lives (Arránz Becker & Loter, 2021). This is evident in the responses of some participants, who view the MBG as part of the government's responsibility to improve the public's quality of life. However, perceptions of the program's benefits are not entirely detached from the surrounding political context. In some cases, the public benefits actually serve as the basis for political interpretations of the policy. Recent studies indicate that welfare policies are often interpreted politically when they are introduced during periods close to electoral cycles (Enggist et al., 2022). This suggests that the program's benefits are evaluated not only functionally but also within the framework of political interests.

In this study, although some respondents viewed the MBG as a beneficial policy, others still linked those benefits to potential political interests. This finding reinforces the argument that, in the context of electoral democracy, welfare policies are never entirely neutral. Conversely, the benefits of a policy can be incorporated into a political strategy to build legitimacy and a positive image in the public eye (Ringle & Sarstedt, 2021). Furthermore, from a political perception perspective, how the public understands the benefits of a program is heavily influenced by their subjective experiences and the information they receive. Perceptions of benefits are shaped not only by objective conditions but also by narratives that emerge in the public sphere (Webster & Albertson, 2022). Therefore, two individuals with the same experiences may perceive the benefits of the same program differently.

This situation is evident in the research findings, which reveal differing interpretations between respondents who view the MBG as a purely welfare policy and those who associate it with political interests. The survey results indicate that respondents' perceptions of the MBG program's benefits are divided. A total of 43 respondents (21.5%) agreed that the MBG program provides tangible benefits to the community, particularly in meeting nutritional needs and improving well-being. Meanwhile, 22 respondents (11%) neutral and 135 respondents (67.5%) disagreed or expressed significant doubt regarding the program's benefits.

**Figure 1.** Graph of Perceptions of the Benefits of the MBG Program from 200 Respondents



Respondents who agreed generally believed that the MBG program has the potential to assist vulnerable groups, particularly in meeting basic needs. However, the majority of respondents who disagreed noted that the program's benefits have not yet been widely felt, and that various challenges remain in its implementation on the ground. These findings indicate that within the framework of welfare politics, the perceived legitimacy of the policy's benefits has not yet been firmly established among respondents; consequently, perceptions of the program remain largely critical and have not yet solidified as an effective welfare policy.

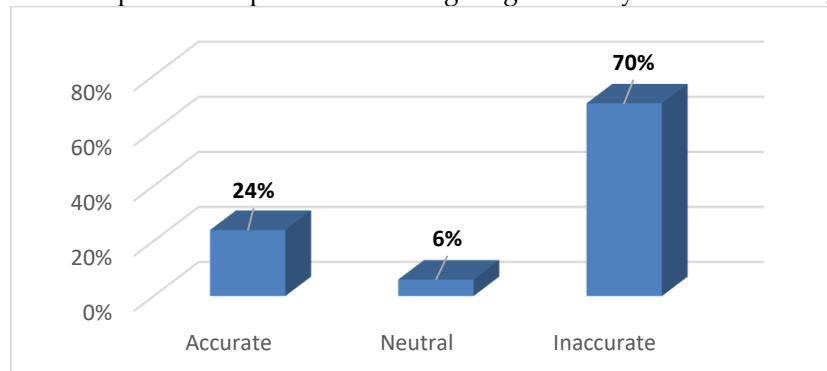
## 2. The Effectiveness of the MBG Program

In addition to the program's benefits, targeting accuracy is a key factor in shaping public perception of the MBG policy. Research findings indicate that respondents hold diverse views on whether the program has reached the intended groups. Some respondents believe the MBG has been sufficiently targeted, while others question the program's distribution effectiveness.

In the public policy literature, targeting accuracy is a key indicator for assessing the success of welfare program implementation. Programs perceived as poorly targeted tend to erode public trust in the government (Bastos Lima & Kmoch, 2021). This suggests that perceptions of policy distribution have direct implications for political legitimacy. In the context of welfare politics, targeting is not only about the technical aspects of distribution but also about perceptions of social justice. The public tends to evaluate policies based on whether benefits are distributed fairly and equitably (Rehm et al., 2022). When policies are perceived as unfair, negative perceptions of the program increase.

The findings of this study indicate that perceptions of the MBG program's targeting accuracy influence how the public interprets it in a broader context. Respondents who believe the program is well-targeted tend to hold more positive perceptions, while those who question its distribution tend to associate the program with political interests. Regarding targeting accuracy, the survey results show that the majority of respondents hold negative views on the distribution of the MBG program. A total of 140 respondents (70%) stated that the MBG program is not well-targeted, while 48 respondents (24%) assessed the program as well-targeted, and 12 respondents (6%) chose a neutral answer.

**Figure 2.** Graph of Perceptions of the Targeting Accuracy of the MBG Program



Respondents who assessed the program as off-target generally cited various implementation issues, such as uneven distribution and on-the-ground cases indicating quality problems, including reports of food unfit for consumption and potential food poisoning. This reinforces the perception that the program has not yet fully reached its primary target groups. Conversely, respondents who assessed the program as on-target argued that, in concept, the MBG is a policy aimed at groups in need, although its implementation still needs improvement. These findings indicate a discrepancy between the policy design and its implementation on the ground.

From the perspective of political perception, the accuracy of targeting is also influenced by the information the public receives. Information regarding who benefits from a program and how it is distributed can significantly shape public perception (Garrett & Bond, 2021). This indicates that perceptions are influenced not only by objective reality but also by the construction of information. Furthermore, in the context of the 2029 elections, perceptions of targeting accuracy become increasingly important in shaping political interpretations of policies. Programs perceived as poorly targeted risk being viewed as ineffective political tools, while those seen as well-targeted can strengthen the government's legitimacy.

Thus, targeting accuracy is not only a technical indicator of a program's success but also a key factor in shaping public perception. This suggests that in an electoral democracy, the success of a policy is measured not only by its implementation but also by how the public perceives it.

### **3. The Relationship Between the MBG Program and the Electoral Political Context**

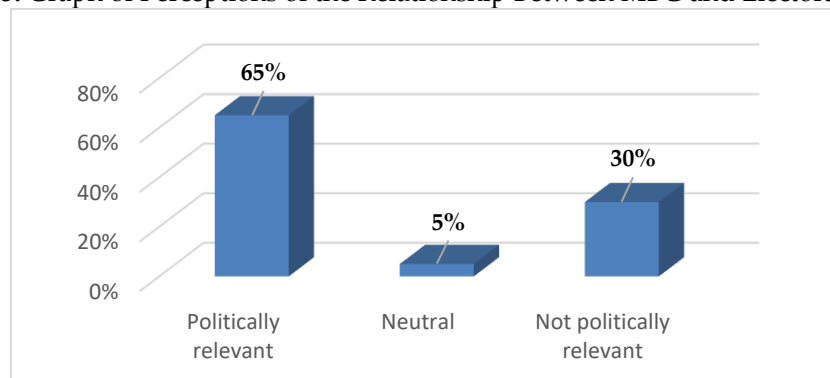
The main findings of this study indicate that the majority of respondents associate the MBG with the political agenda leading up to the 2029 elections, particularly in terms of political image-building and potential electoral implications. These findings provide strong evidence that public perceptions of welfare policies are inextricably linked to the surrounding political context. In the literature on welfare politics, this phenomenon is often linked to the use of social policies as instruments to gain political support. Recent studies show that welfare policies are often used to boost the government's popularity in an electoral context (Dixit & Londregan, 1998). This reinforces the finding that the public tends to see a connection between social policies and political interests.

From the perspective of political perception, the association between the MBG and the 2029 elections indicates that the public possesses a fairly high level of political awareness when interpreting public policy. This perception is based not only on the content of the policy but also on the temporal context and the actors involved (Liang & Zhang, 2021). Consequently, policies introduced in the run-up to elections are more easily perceived as part of a political strategy. Interestingly, although the majority of respondents associate MBG with politics, not all share this view, some respondents still view this program as a welfare policy oriented toward

the public interest. This indicates a duality of perception within society, where the same policy can be interpreted differently.

In terms of political relevance, the survey results indicate that the majority of respondents associate the MBG program with political dynamics leading up to the 2029 elections. A total of 130 respondents (65%) stated that the MBG program is linked to the political agenda, particularly in shaping political image and potential electoral implications for government actors. Respondents in this group generally assess that the emergence of the MBG program in the period leading up to the election cannot be separated from political interests, and therefore perceive the program as part of a strategy to build public support. This perception reflects respondents' political awareness in their interpretation of public policy. Meanwhile, 60 respondents (30%) view the MBG as a welfare policy oriented toward the public interest and not directly linked to a political agenda. This group tends to evaluate the program based on its objectives and social benefits, without linking it to electoral dynamics. And a total of 10 respondents (5%) chose a neutral answer.

**Figure 3.** Graph of Perceptions of the Relationship Between MBG and Electoral Politics



This duality reflects the complexity of the relationship between policy and politics in electoral democracies. In many cases, welfare policies indeed serve a dual function: as a social instrument and as a political tool (Stokes et al., 2021). Consequently, public perceptions of policies often fall somewhere along the spectrum between these two functions.

In the context of this study, the association between the MBG and the 2029 General Election indicates that the public is not merely a recipient of policy but also an active actor in interpreting the political significance behind such policies. This underscores the importance of public perception in understanding the dynamics of electoral democracy. Overall, these findings reinforce the argument in the abstract that perceptions of welfare policies are political and contextual. Public perceptions of MBG are determined not only by the program's benefits and implementation but also by the surrounding political context. Thus, this study makes an important contribution to enriching the literature on welfare politics and political perception within the context of electoral democracy in Indonesia.

#### 4. Analysis of Perception and Targeting Accuracy in the Context of Welfare Politics

These findings extend the welfare politics framework by demonstrating that, in developing democracies, policy legitimacy is determined not only by distributive outcomes but also by public perceptions of fairness and effectiveness. This study also challenges the conventional assumption that welfare policies primarily generate political support, showing instead that ineffective implementation may lead to the politicisation of policy in a negative sense. From the perspective of welfare politics, the relationship between benefits and targeting is the primary foundation of the legitimacy of welfare policies. Recent literature emphasises that the sustainability of welfare policies depends heavily on public support, which is shaped by evaluations of their performance in terms of distribution and effectiveness (Nemčok et al., 2026). When the public perceives that a policy's benefits are suboptimal and its distribution is unfair, the policy's legitimacy erodes significantly.

This aligns with the findings of this study, which found that the majority of respondents not only doubted the program's benefits but also questioned its targeting accuracy. This situation reinforces the argument that evaluations of distributive justice strongly influence perceptions of welfare policies. Recent studies indicate that perceptions of distributive justice are directly related to public trust in government and public institutions (Theiss et al., 2025). In other words, when the public perceives that the distribution of benefits under a policy is unfair, trust in that policy diminishes.

The low perceived benefits and targeting accuracy in this study imply an increasing tendency among the public to interpret policies within a political framework. In this context, the finding that 65% of respondents associate the MBG with the 2029 election agenda becomes highly relevant. Recent literature indicates that when public policies are perceived as ineffective or unfair, the public tends to attribute such policies to political strategies rather than viewing them as purely public policies (Garritzmann et al., 2023). Within the framework of political perception, this phenomenon can be explained by cognitive mechanisms in which individuals use available information to construct interpretations of policies. Perceptions are not formed objectively but through an interpretive process influenced by experience, information, and the socio-political context (Nemčok et al., 2026). Therefore, when the public identifies a discrepancy between a policy's objectives and its implementation, they tend to seek alternative explanations, one of which is the policy's political motives.

This situation is further reinforced by the context of electoral democracy, where public policy is often inseparable from the dynamics of political competition. Recent studies indicate that in democratic systems, welfare policies often serve as strategic tools for building political image and securing public support (Peltoniemi et al., 2024). This explains why programs like the MBG, which are substantively social

policies, can be perceived by the public as political instruments. Furthermore, the interaction between perceptions of benefits and targeting accuracy also reveals a cumulative pattern of evaluation. That is, negative perceptions of one aspect of a policy tend to influence perceptions of other aspects. In this study, respondents who assessed the program as off-target also tended to doubt its benefits and were more likely to associate it with political interests. This indicates that public perceptions of policy are holistic rather than partial.

In the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is becoming increasingly significant given the country's still-developing democracy and the public's high sensitivity to political issues. Recent research indicates that perceptions of government performance are significantly related to public political participation and electoral orientation (Nurlinah et al., 2025). Thus, perceptions of policies such as the MBG not only impact the evaluation of the policy itself but also broader political dynamics.

Interestingly, although the majority of respondents associate the MBG with politics, 21.5% still view the program as a public welfare policy. This indicates that public perception is not homogeneous but rather fragmented, shaped by individual experiences and how people process information. Recent literature confirms that these differences in perception are often influenced by ideology, generation, and social experience (Kim, 2024). This duality of perception reflects a key characteristic of political perception, wherein the same policy can be interpreted differently by different social groups. In this context, MBG is not only the subject of policy but also a battleground for competing interpretations within the public sphere. Some members of the public view it as a social solution, while others see it as a political strategy.

The findings of this study also indicate that perceptions of welfare policies are contextual, particularly in relation to political momentum. The introduction of the MBG program ahead of the 2029 elections was a key factor in shaping public interpretation of the policy. The literature indicates that the timing of policies significantly affects public perception, particularly in an electoral context (Butler et al., 2025). Thus, the results of this study reinforce the argument that perceptions of welfare policies cannot be separated from the surrounding political context. Public perceptions of the MBG are not only reflections of evaluations of the policy itself but also the result of interactions among social, political, and cognitive factors.

This analysis shows that the three main dimensions, benefits, targeting accuracy, and political context, are intertwined in shaping public perception. Low perceptions of benefits and targeting accuracy contribute to an increasing tendency to associate policies with political interests. This confirms that in the context of electoral democracy, welfare policies function not only as social instruments but also as objects of political interpretation. These findings make an important contribution to the literature on welfare politics and political perception, particularly in

developing countries such as Indonesia. This study demonstrates that to understand public perceptions of welfare policies, an approach is needed that considers not only the policies themselves but also the surrounding political and social contexts. Thus, this research reinforces the argument in the abstract that perceptions of welfare policies are political and contextual within the dynamics of electoral democracy.

Overall, this study demonstrates that public perception functions as a mediating variable between welfare policy and electoral politics. Rather than directly influencing voting behaviour, welfare policies are first interpreted, evaluated, and politically constructed by the public. This highlights the importance of incorporating perception as a central analytical dimension in future studies of welfare politics, particularly in developing democratic contexts.

## Conclusion

Public perception of the Makan Bergizi Gratis (MBG) program in the Special Region of Yogyakarta is strongly influenced by the electoral context of the 2029 general election. The findings show that most respondents doubt the program's benefits (67.5%) and perceive its distribution as poorly targeted (70%), which leads to a dominant interpretation of the program as a political instrument rather than a purely welfare policy (65%). This study demonstrates that in a developing electoral democracy, the legitimacy of welfare policies depends primarily on perceived effectiveness and targeting accuracy. When these aspects are weak, the public tends to reinterpret policies through a political lens, associating them with electoral interests. At the same time, the presence of a smaller group of respondents who perceive the program positively (21.5%) indicates that public perception is fragmented and shaped by individual experiences and exposure to information. However, this study is limited by its focus on student respondents in a single region, which restricts broader generalisation. In addition, the use of a three-point Likert scale limits the depth of perceptual variation captured in the data. Future research should include more diverse social groups and regions and apply more advanced statistical methods better to understand the relationship between welfare perceptions and electoral dynamics. Overall, this study confirms that welfare policies are not neutral in electoral contexts, but are interpreted as political signals within the broader dynamics of democratic competition.

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