TRANSACTIONAL POLITICS AND RECIPROCITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: AN ANALYSIS OF THE 2024 SIDIKALANG ELECTION

Pairus Ayainas Pinem[1a*], Elly Warnisyah Harahap[2b]

[12] Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara

pairus0404213031@uinsu.ac.id
ellywarnisyah@uinsu.ac.id

(*)Corresponding Author:
pairus0404213031@uinsu.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the political practice of reciprocating in the 2024 Regional Elections in Sidikalang District and the factors that affect it. By using a qualitative approach and in-depth interview techniques with various informants such as success teams, community leaders, voters, and party administrators, it was found that the practice of reciprocating favors is the main strategy in building political support. The politics of reciprocity is carried out through the provision of social assistance, promises of projects, and the strengthening of ethnic or religious ties. The main factors driving this practice are patron-client relations, weak political education, party pragmatism, and the dominance of clienteleistic strategies in campaigns. These findings show that local democracy is still colored by transactional relations that hinder the formation of a government that is oriented towards the public interest. Therefore, efforts to improve political literacy, party reform, and law enforcement against money politics are needed to encourage a cleaner and more integrity election process.

Introductions

The election of Regional Heads (Pilkada) is one of the concrete forms of democratic practice in Indonesia. In this process, the community is given the right to elect its leaders directly. However, behind this democratic spirit,

various political practices have emerged that actually threaten the substance of democracy itself. One of the most striking practices is the politics of reciprocity, which is the tendency of voters to give support based on personal relationships, services received, or certain rewards, rather than because of the candidate's capabilities or visions.

In Sidikalang District, the practice of returning favor politics has become a deeply rooted phenomenon, especially in the context of the 2024 Regional Elections. The involvement of community leaders, family networks, and even social assistance from regional head candidates is the main factor in shaping the political loyalty of the community. The patron-client relationship is very evident in this political process, where the candidate for regional head acts as a patron who provides resources or assistance, while the community becomes a client who reciprocates it through political support. (Hendayana , 2020)

This phenomenon cannot be separated from the social and cultural structure of the Sidikalang community which still upholds the value of kinship and gratitude. In many cases, political support is given not solely because of political rationality, but because of a sense of indebtedness to candidates who have helped economically, socially, or symbolically. This blurs the line between healthy political participation and emotional attachment that can be detrimental to electoral democracy. (São Paulo, São Paulo & Squirt , 2020)

Theoretically, the practice of revenge politics is part of the patronage politics that often occurs in developing democratic systems. In this context, democracy is not only run through formal institutions, but also through informal networks based on mutual interests between candidates and voters. Revenge politics can affect voter behavior, the distribution of political resources, and the legitimacy of the government formed after the election. (Rusli et al., 2020)

This reality raises fundamental questions about the quality of democracy at the local level. If voters consider personal relationships more than work programs, then the results of the democratic process may not reflect the public interest at large. Therefore, this study is important to examine more deeply how the politics of revenge work in the 2024 Regional Elections in Sidikalang District and what factors affect it.

Based on this background, the formulation of the problem in this study is:
1. How did the political practice of reciprocate occur in the 2024 Regional Elections in Sidikalang District?
2. What factors influence the emergence of revenge politics in the region?
3. What is the impact of transactional political practices and reciprocity on voter behavior in Sidikalang?

The objectives of this study are:
1. Analyzing the form and pattern of political practices in the 2024 Regional Elections in Sidikalang District.
2. Identify and explain the factors that affect the strength of the political practice of reciprocity among voters.
3. Knowing the impact of transactional political practices and reciprocity on voter behavior in Sidikalang.

Literature Review
The Concept of Revenge Politics

Politics of reciprocity is part of political practice based on the reciprocal relationship between the giver and the recipient of services or assistance. In the context of elections, the politics of revenge arises when voters feel that they have a moral obligation to support a certain candidate because of the assistance or services that have been received

before. These relationships are often not rational in a substantive political sense, but rather emotional and personal. (Hendayana , 2020)

Politics of revenge refers to the practice of rewarding previous political support, especially in the context of patron-client relationships. This concept thrives in a transactional electoral democratic system in Indonesia. Revenge politics is also the practice of giving benefits or positions in return for political support that has been given. This phenomenon is common in patron-client relations in the local political system in Indonesia. In Indonesian society that still upholds the values of family and mutual cooperation, the politics of reciprocity are often considered natural. A community leader or regional head candidate who has helped build village facilities, provided social assistance, or simply attended traditional events will receive sympathy and political support as a form of reciprocity. This concept is very close to what is referred to by as "stream politics" and social practices that are cultural in nature. (Mietzner , 2013) (Pakazeni & Cindy Nabilla, 2020) Geertz (1973)

This phenomenon is strengthened by the weak political education of the community. Low political literacy makes people more easily influenced by momentary assistance than considering the long-term programs offered by candidates. This is in line with the opinion that the rationality of voters in Indonesia is still often shaped by personal relationships rather than public policy orientation. Priono (2008)

Patronage and Clientelism in Local Politics

In much of the political literature, the practice of reciprocity is often categorized within the framework of patronage and clientelism. Patronage refers to the provision of resources by political elites to certain individuals or groups to gain political support. In this relationship, patrons expect a return in the form of votes, mass support, or political legitimacy.

At the local level, patron-client practices are very dominant, especially in areas where the community's economic dependence is still high on political elites or local officials. Clients (the public) will prefer candidates who provide "immediate benefits" to those who only offer intangible visions and missions. According to , this kind of practice is very common in post-reform Indonesia, especially in areas where the economic base is not yet established Buehler (2010)

Local studies such as those conducted in Central Java also show that patron-client relationships can strengthen the dominance of local elites, create structural dependencies, and inhibit the birth of more progressive alternative leaders. Arifin (2015)

Voters in Electoral Democracy

In an electoral democratic system, voters should be rational actors who make political choices based on consideration of the candidate's program, ideology, or track record. However, the reality on the ground is often different. In many regional elections, including in areas such as Sidikalang, voter behavior is influenced by sociological, psychological, and structural factors. Money politics, emotional closeness, and informal relationships are the main determinants in political decision-making. In an electoral democracy, voters ideally play an active and rational role in making their choices, but are often caught up in transactional relations and political pragmatism. This presents a serious challenge in consolidating democracy at the local level. (Syaputra & Yusrizal , 2020)

Voters in the context of local elections often do not have sufficient access to objective political information. In addition, the involvement of indigenous leaders, religious leaders, and local elites in the campaign strengthens the informal structure in shaping people's political preferences. This then makes revenge politics not just a campaign strategy, but part of the local political culture. In the political system of the constitution, obedience is an important

and fundamental thing. Without this principle, the authority of the state, the authority of the government is meaningless. Laws made to organize government are also meaningless if the community or its citizens do not obey the laws or rules. (Katimin , 2017)

Method

Approaches and Types of Research

In this study, the approach used is a political science approach with a focus on political behavior. This approach is used to analyze how political actors, both candidates and voters, behave in the context of the 2024 Sidikalang Regional Election, especially in transactional political practices and reciprocity. (Priono , 2008)

The use of a political approach in this study is very relevant because the main object of study concerns the phenomenon that occurs in the electoral political arena, namely the 2024 Regional Elections. Transactional politics and the practice of revenge are part of the dynamics of power, the distribution of resources, and the relationship between elites and society, all of which are core studies in political science.

Location and Subject of Research

This study also uses the patron-client theory to explain the unequal reciprocal relationship between those who have power or resources (patrons) and those who need protection or assistance (clients), where patrons provide material assistance, services, or access to power, while clients reciprocate with loyalty, *political* support, or certain services. These relationships are personal, informal, and often long-term. In the context of local politics, such as the Regional Elections, this theory is relevant to understand the practice of revenge politics, money politics, and the mobilization of support based on traditional social relations. (Ahmad, 2017)

The research was conducted in Sidikalang District, Dairi Regency, North Sumatra Province. This location *was* chosen because it is a politically active area, has social heterogeneity, and is an interesting example of local politics colored by the practice of reciprocity. Research subjects include:

1. Voters (residents who participate in the 2024 Regional Elections),
2. Successful teams and candidate volunteers,
3. Community leaders, and
4. Election organizers at the sub-district level.

Data Collection Techniques

Data is collected through three main techniques:

1. In-depth interviews with key informants, both voters and local political actors.
2. Participatory observation of the political dynamics that occurred before and after the Regional Elections.
3. Documentation studies, including news analysis, KPU documents, and candidate campaign materials.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out with the Miles and Huberman interactive model which included three stages, namely:

1. Data reduction – selecting and summarizing important information from the results of interviews and observations.

2. Data presentation – compiling information in the form of a descriptive narrative.
3. Conclusion drawing and verification – formulating patterns, themes, and relationships between variables.

To maintain the validity of the data, source triangulation techniques and method triangulation techniques are used, which are comparing data from interviews, observations, and documents to ensure the consistency of findings.

Result and Discussions

Forms of Revenge Politics Found in the Field

From the results of field research in Sidikalang District, there are various forms of revenge politics that have emerged in the 2024 Regional Election process. These forms include:

1. Providing social assistance before the campaign period, such as rice, cooking oil, and cash.
2. The construction of public facilities such as village road repairs, renovations of houses of worship, or fertilizer assistance is claimed to come from the candidate's "personal initiative".
3. The candidate's personal presence in traditional and grieving events, which gives the impression of emotional closeness.
4. Providing temporary jobs, such as making residents volunteers or campaign movers in exchange for daily money.

An interview with a volunteer showed that campaign activities are no longer just socialization of visions and missions, but touch the emotional side and daily needs of the community. "We don't only talk about programs, but also help residents if there is a need. That's what they remember," said Mr. Rinto Berutu, campaign field coordinator in Huta Rakyat Village (Interview, March 2025).

The Pattern of the Patron-Client Relationship: An Unequal But Functional Relationship

The patron-client pattern is very clear in Sidikalang District. Patrons, in this case regional head candidates, position themselves as resource providers, while residents as recipients have a moral obligation to provide support in the form of votes.

In an interview with one of the community leaders, it was stated that the relationship between the local elite and the community had been formed long before the Regional Elections. "People here are used to being given, and they will remember it forever. If you have been loved, you have to reciprocate, it is already a culture," he said. This phenomenon strengthens the theory of Koentjaraningrat that in agrarian or semi-agrarian societies, power relations are symbolic and long-lasting. (Jatmiko, 2022)

Although not power-equal, these relationships are functional. The community gets assistance that cannot be provided by the state, while the candidate for regional head gets a guarantee of support. This reflects a situation of "trade-offs" in local politics that is difficult to avoid in a society with economic inequality.

Politics of Revenge and the Fragility of Democratic Consciousness

From the findings of the field, it can be seen that many voters do not fully understand the meaning of rational political participation. When asked about the reason for voting, most of them said "have been helped", "close to family", or "community leaders suggested". Only a small percentage consider work programs. Politics of revenge weakens democratic consciousness because it replaces voter rationality with transactional relationships based on personal rewards. This makes the democratic process a formality without the critical participation of the people. (Siregar & Ha, 2024)

This reflects that the politics of revenge has shifted the orientation of the election from a contest of ideas to a contest of services. Democracy becomes procedural, not substantive. As stated by , democracy without mature political consciousness will produce voters who only act as political objects. (Priono   , 2008)

This phenomenon also has an impact on the low active participation of the community in supervising candidates after being elected. Because the relationships formed are personal relationships, not socio-political contracts, people are reluctant to criticize or demand accountability when leaders do not run programs transparently.

Social Media and Changing Patterns of Reciprocity

Interestingly, in the 2024 Regional Elections, social media will begin to play a role in expanding the practice of symbolic reciprocity. Candidates not only provide direct assistance, but also publish assistance on social media, either in the form of videos, photos, or live broadcasts.

One of the candidates is known to have created a YouTube content with the theme "Walking and Helping Residents", which shows their activities in handing over aid to villagers. This video then went viral among Sidikalang residents and strengthened the impression that the candidate was close and generous.

This shows a transformation of the form of patronage towards a more digital direction, where the return of the favor is not only direct (face-to-face), but can also be strengthened through digital narratives. This is referred to as "digital symbolic patronage", where aid becomes an image platform to build political loyalty. Basically, politics also has a communication medium, which is a means or tool of political communication in the process of conveying political information and opinions indirectly, both to the government and society in general. These communication media facilities include print media such as newspapers, magazines, newsletters, brochures, tabloids and so on. Meanwhile, electronic media such as television, radio, internet and so on. Communication media are expected to be able to process, circulate information and even seek aspirations/opinions as political news. (Tampubolon   , 2023)

However, some critical residents see this as a form of information manipulation. "We know it's an imagery, but other residents really like the content," said Mrs. Nurlina Manik, a local NGO activist in Sidikalang (Interview, March 2025). This indicates that there needs to be stronger media literacy among voters.

Dependence on Local Elites and Lack of Independent Initiatives

One of the important findings is the low collective capacity of society to break the chain of dependence on political elites. Although there is an awareness that reciprocate does not always lead to policies that benefit the public, limited access to state aid makes the political elite the only hope for the lower class.

Some residents stated that they did not have too much hope for the district or provincial government, but rather on the "kindness" of the regional head candidate. This indicates that local autonomy has not fully succeeded in empowering the community as political subjects. Local democracy is often interpreted as a change of elites rather than an institutional transformation. Elections do not change the way power works, but only change who manages the patron-client relationship. (Rizkika   et al., 2019)

The Impact of Revenge Politics on Public Policy

The politics of revenge not only affects the election process, but also on the practice of government after the elections. Candidates who win with the support of a reciprocal network are more likely to repay volunteers and community leaders who have helped them, by providing projects, positions, or special access.

This has the potential to create policy corruption, where government programs are no longer designed for the public interest at large, but to pay political debts. In some cases, village budget allocations are allegedly directed to areas that support candidates, while opposition areas are neglected.

This threatens the principle of distribution justice in local democracy and weakens the supervisory function of the DPRD and community participation in village development deliberations. In the long run, this can erode trust in democracy and increase people's political apathy.

The Role of Political Parties in Reproducing Revenge Politics

Political parties in Sidikalang do not fully carry out the function of political education. On the contrary, parties tend to be an electoral vehicle that is only active in the run-up to the Regional Elections. Research shows that the recruitment of candidates for regional heads is based more on logistical capacity and personal closeness than ideological or programmatic capacity. Political parties play an important role in reproducing the politics of revenge through the nomination of candidates who are loyal and able to ensure the distribution of resources to constituents. This practice strengthens patronage as well as weakens party institutions ideologically. (Arianto , 2020)

One of the chairmen of the PAC (Sub-Branch Leaders) of the major party stated that "whoever has the potential to win and can help the party financially, that's what we support. This attitude shows that the party is helping to strengthen the culture of reciprocity by making candidates 'political investors' who will later "withdraw their capital" after being elected.

This practice makes the political process closed and transactional. In line with the findings, the Indonesian party system has experienced oligarchism that moves away from the function of people's representation. In a local context such as Sidikalang, this narrows the access of alternative political actors to enter the arena of power. (Ambardi , 2009)

Identity Politics and Ethnicity-Based Revenge

In Sidikalang District, ethnic identity also affects the practice of reciprocity. In interviews with residents from the Batak Toba and Papak communities, they tend to choose candidates who come from the same ethnicity, especially if the candidate has shown partiality in traditional or church affairs.

Ethnicity is not only a cultural identity, but also a means of political mobilization. One of the church leaders stated that "our citizens believe more in people who are 'of the same mind', not because of the program, but because they understand each other's culture. This suggests that identity politics is used to build political loyalty based on cultural affiliation, which is then reinforced by the practice of reciprocity. (Duwila , 2022)

A strong collective identity becomes a fertile ground for revenge strategies because emotional bonds are easier to use for political purposes. Ethnic and religious affiliations are often a tool for securing votes on a particular basis. However, in the long run, this practice has the potential to lead to social polarization and policy discrimination if leaders only side with certain groups. (Utomo , 2022)

Client-Based Winning Strategies

The successful team in Sidikalang plays an important role as a liaison between candidates and voters. They not only organize the logistics of the campaign, but also run a personal door-to-door approach. One of the most effective strategies is to make local figures the "voice guards". Clientism-based winning strategies rely on providing materials, promises of office, or access to resources to voters in exchange for political support. This pattern is

commonly used in local elections in Indonesia to build short-term political loyalty. (Aspinall &   Bear Schot   , 2019)

One of the campaign team coordinators stated that: "We have people in every hamlet. They know who to work with, who to persuade, and who to be given as a mover. This strategy is very much in line with the pattern of local clientelism, where trust is built through informal and reciprocal relationships.

This kind of practice has been going on for a long time in many regions in Indonesia and is a form of adaptation of the political elite to the weak party system and low political literacy of the people. (Robison &   Hadith , 2005)

Public Views on Political Practices in Return for Favors

Although most people support the practice of reciprocity, there are also young and educated people who are beginning to be critical of the practice. This group generally has internet access and is used to consuming political content from national media. They consider that the politics of revenge hinder regional progress because it ignores the aspect of professionalism.   (Utomo   , 2023)

Interviews with students from STAI Sidikalang show that the younger generation is beginning to question unaccountable political practices. "We want leaders who can solve regional problems, not those who are just close but incompetent," said Ricky Sihombing, a student of STAI Sidikalang (Interview, March 2025).

However, their voices are still not dominant. In a local political scheme dominated by informal networks, these critical voices are still marginalized. This shows the existence of a generation gap in political perception, where the younger tend to be idealistic while the older generation is more pragmatic and loyal. (Sobari   , 2022)

The Impact of Transactional Politics and Reciprocity on Voter Behavior in Sidikalang

The practice of transactional politics and reciprocity in the 2024 Sidikalang Regional Election has a significant impact on voter behavior in the region. The main impact is the shift in voter motivation from programmatic rationality to momentary pragmatic interests. Voters tend to vote for candidates who provide material assistance, cash, or personal promises, rather than based on the candidate's vision, mission, and competencies. (Gumelar   et al., 2021)

This phenomenon reinforces the deep-rooted culture of clientelism, where the relationship between the candidate for regional head and voters becomes a patron-client relationship. In this relationship, voters feel a moral obligation to repay the "kindness" of the candidate by voting for him, regardless of political rational considerations. This results in low critical awareness of public politics, as voters focus more on short-term rewards than the sustainability of good governance. In addition, this practice weakens trust in democratic institutions, because people are accustomed to thinking of elections as a place to "buy and sell votes" and not as a means of meaningful political participation. In the long run, this can preserve political elites who are incompetent, corrupt, and not in the interests of the people. (Arianto   , 2020) (Ermaya   , 2022)

Recommendations to Overcome Politics of Revenge

The results of this study show that the politics of revenge has become an institutionalized practice. Therefore, solutions cannot only be technocratic, but must touch cultural, institutional, and educational aspects. Some important recommendations:

1. Improving community political education, especially through non-formal channels such as church communities, farmer groups, and youth organizations.

2. Reform of the political party recruitment system, so that candidates are not only selected based on logistical strength but also track record and leadership capacity.
3. The involvement of indigenous and religious leaders in local political supervision, because they have moral legitimacy in the eyes of the community.
4. Strengthening campaign regulations and law enforcement against money politics, which until now is still very weak at the regional level.

These measures require collaboration between local governments, election organizing agencies, civil society, and local media. Without structural and cultural change, the politics of revenge will continue to be an obstacle to healthy democracy at the local level. (Solihah   , 2016)

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the practice of political return of favors in the 2024 Regional Elections in Sidikalang District occurs through reciprocal relationships between candidates and voters, where political support is reciprocated with certain rewards such as social assistance, money, or promises of office. Transactional politics is the main strategy in gaining votes, especially among economically vulnerable communities.

Factors that affect the emergence of revenge politics include a strong patron-client culture, weak economic conditions of the community, and weak political awareness of citizens. In addition, the emotional approach and personal closeness between candidates and voters also reinforce this practice.

The impact of transactional politics and reciprocity on voter behavior is a reduction in rationality in determining political choices. Voters tend to vote based on short-term rewards rather than the visions and missions of the candidate, which can ultimately undermine the quality of democracy and produce incompetent leaders.

Suggestion

To reduce the practice of political revenge in the Regional Elections, it is necessary to increase political education for the public to better understand the importance of voting based on programs, not because of rewards or personal closeness. Political parties also need to be more selective in recruiting candidates, considering capacity and integrity, not just logistics. In addition, supervision from community leaders, religious institutions, and law enforcement officials must be strengthened to prevent money politics and ensure that the election process runs honestly and fairly.

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