

SHIFTS IN VOTER BEHAVIOR AND THE ELECTORAL CHALLENGES FACING PKB IN THE 2024 DEMAK LOCAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

Recent developments in Indonesia's local democracy reveal a reconfiguration of voter behavior that challenges assumptions about the durability of identity-based electoral loyalty. This article analyzes the electoral defeat of the National Awakening Party (PKB) in the 2024 Demak local election as an empirical anomaly, given the party's strong socio-religious embeddedness and its electoral dominance in the simultaneous legislative election within the same district. Rather than attributing the outcome solely to organizational weakness, the study situates PKB's loss within broader shifts in voter rationality, the declining mobilizational capacity of religious identity, and structural constraints shaping local party performance. Employing a qualitative, narrative-based literature review, the article engages with scholarship on voting behavior, Islamic political mobilization, party institutional functions, and subnational democratic competition in Indonesia. The analysis demonstrates that voters increasingly evaluate candidates and parties through pragmatic, contextual, and performance-oriented considerations, thereby weakening the determinative role of Nahdlatul Ulama based identity appeals. Concurrently, deficiencies in candidate recruitment, limited campaign adaptability, and coordination challenges within broad electoral coalitions constrained PKB's capacity to convert symbolic legitimacy and organizational networks into effective electoral support. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the declining electoral relevance of religious identity and emphasizing adaptive party organization in local Indonesian politics contemporary.

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INTRODUCTION

Post-Reformasi electoral democracy in Indonesia has been characterized by increasing political openness, intensified multiparty competition, and evolving relationships between political parties and voters. Within this context,

classical assumptions regarding the stability of party support particularly for parties rooted in strong social and religious identities have come under significant strain. A growing body of scholarship suggests that Indonesian voters are no longer predominantly bound by inherited ideological loyalties or enduring cultural affiliations, but are increasingly influenced by rational, evaluative, and context-specific considerations (Jati, 2012; Raharjo, 2018). This shift has contributed to heightened electoral volatility and uncertainty, especially in local political contests such as regional head elections.

Demak Regency exemplifies the complexity of these changes. Historically, Demak occupies a distinctive symbolic position in the development of Islam in Java, dating back to the Sultanate of Demak Bintoro. This legacy has shaped a collective identity grounded in religiosity and strong attachment to ulama authority (Sari & Imawan, 2023). Such historical foundations intersect with the sociological dominance of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), whose networks continue to structure much of Demak's religious and social life. In modern political discourse, this configuration has often led to the perception of Demak as a stronghold for traditional Islamic political parties, particularly PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa).

PKB's prominence in Demak, however, should be situated within the broader trajectory of Islamic politics in Indonesia. The transformation of Islamic political power from traditional authority structures into the arena of electoral democracy has produced increasingly heterogeneous and adaptive patterns of Muslim voter behavior (Armansyah, 2017). During the Reformasi era, political liberalization and the proliferation of Islamic parties did not translate into automatic or uniform support from Muslim voters. Instead, electoral preferences have become fragmented, shaped by evaluations of candidate figures, political performance, and the perceived relevance of policy agendas.

This tendency is evident in Demak, where PKB's strong performance in legislative elections has not consistently translated into success in local executive contests. In the 2024 legislative election, PKB once again emerged as the largest vote recipient in Demak Regency. Yet in the 2024 Demak local election, the party suffered defeat despite leading a broad coalition and controlling a majority of seats in the local legislature. This outcome constitutes an electoral paradox that challenges assumptions about the effectiveness of NU-based cultural capital and party structural dominance in securing local political victories.

The phenomenon points to a broader transformation in voter behavior. Empirical studies indicate that local voters increasingly assess candidates based on personal capacity, track records, and perceived material benefits, rather than party affiliation or religious identity alone (Fitriyah et al., 2021; Jati, 2012). Religious identity politics continues to exert influence, but its impact is situational and mediated by pragmatic factors such as economic conditions, patronage networks, and campaign strategies (Haq, 2023; Mulyono, 2017).

Contemporary literature on voting behavior in Indonesia further suggests that voters operate within a framework of bounded rationality. While they are not entirely detached from social influences or patron-client relations, they are no longer unconditionally compliant with political elites or religious authorities (Jati, 2012). Electoral choices emerge from interactions among cultural values, pragmatic interests, local social relations, and information flows through both conventional and digital media. As a result, electoral loyalty has become increasingly fluid and susceptible to change.

Within this evolving environment, political parties face growing electoral complexity. Party success can no longer rely solely on ideological identity or historical bases of support, but depends heavily on the capacity to perform electoral functions adaptively. Candidate recruitment, political marketing, and voter mobilization have become critical variables in determining whether symbolic capital can be converted into tangible electoral support (Pamungkas, 2011). Elitist candidate selection processes risk producing nominees with weak social legitimacy, while poorly contextualized political communication may fail to resonate with local voter concerns.

The case of PKB in Demak illustrates the limitations of religious identity politics when it is not accompanied by internal consolidation and responsive electoral strategies. PKB's historical proximity to NU provides substantial

cultural capital, yet this capital does not automatically guarantee victory when voters perceive alternative candidates as more representative or better equipped to address everyday socio-economic challenges. The authority of kiai and religious networks continues to function as a moral and symbolic reference, but its influence competes with candidate appeal, incumbent performance, and local political-economic dynamics (Yahya & Sahidin, 2022).

Moreover, local elections in Indonesia remain deeply embedded in patronage relations and economic interests. Research demonstrates that business actors frequently operate as political investors, shaping candidate selection, campaign strategies, and voter preferences through the distribution of resources and control over local networks (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Raharjo, 2018). Under such conditions, voters tend to engage in rational evaluations of the concrete benefits offered by candidates, rendering ideological identity a supplementary rather than decisive factor.

Previous studies have shown that the electoral defeat of dominant parties within their traditional strongholds has become increasingly common in Indonesia's electoral democracy. Large coalitions do not necessarily ensure victory in the absence of internal cohesion, strong candidate figures, and effective political communication (Jazuli, 2020). These findings underscore the extent to which local politics has evolved into a more open and unpredictable arena that cannot be explained solely through structural power or historical dominance.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, important analytical gaps remain. Much of the existing literature examines voter behavior and party organization as separate explanatory domains, without sufficiently integrating how changes in voter rationality interact with party electoral functions at the local level. In addition, empirical studies tend to focus either on legislative elections or on local executive elections in isolation, thereby overlooking the analytical significance of divergent outcomes across electoral arenas within the same locality. As a result, limited attention has been paid to cases in which identity-based parties maintain legislative dominance yet fail to secure executive power, particularly in regions with strong historical and religious affiliations.

This article addresses these gaps by treating PKB's defeat in the 2024 Demak local election as a critical case of identity-based electoral vulnerability. Its novelty lies in integrating historical-cultural legacies, evolving voter rationality, and party electoral performance into a unified analytical framework. Rather than framing religious identity politics as simply declining or obsolete, the article demonstrates how organizational shortcomings, candidate selection processes, and strategic misalignments constrain the ability of identity-based parties to translate symbolic capital into electoral success. By doing so, the study advances a more nuanced understanding of local democratic competition in Indonesia and offers conceptual insights into the adaptive challenges faced by religiously rooted political parties in an increasingly fluid and competitive electoral landscape.

Against this backdrop, this article analyzes the transformation of voter behavior and the electoral challenges confronted by PKB in the 2024 Demak local election. It focuses on how shifting voter orientations, the limitations of NU-based identity politics, and the dynamics of party electoral functions contributed to PKB's defeat in a region long regarded as its social base. Departing from single-factor explanations, the article integrates historical-cultural dimensions, rational voter behavior, and party institutional performance into a comprehensive analytical framework. Through a literature-based approach, it synthesizes theoretical and empirical insights on Islamic politics, voting behavior, and local democracy in Indonesia, situating the Demak case within broader national trends while offering critical reflections for religiously based political parties seeking adaptive strategies in an increasingly competitive local electoral landscape.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach based on a literature review to examine the transformation of voter behavior and the electoral challenges faced by PKB in the 2024 Demak local election. This methodological

choice reflects the study's emphasis on conceptual development and theoretical synthesis rather than hypothesis testing through primary field data collection (Creswell, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

The literature review is conducted using a narrative-analytical approach. Rather than merely summarizing existing studies, the selected literature is critically compared and integrated to construct analytical arguments concerning shifts in voter behavior, NU-based identity politics, and the electoral functions of political parties within the context of local democracy. This approach enables a reflective interpretation of ongoing theoretical debates and empirical findings in political science scholarship (Jesson et al., 2011).

The data sources consist of 21 academic references, comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, selected official government documents, and contextual media reports as listed in the reference section. The literature spans a publication period from 1962 to 2024, with analytical emphasis placed on works published during the post-Reformasi era (2010-2024). This period reflects the phase in which voter rationality, identity politics, and local electoral competition in Indonesia have been most intensively debated and empirically examined. Earlier seminal works are included selectively to provide foundational theoretical perspectives, particularly in discussions of political coalitions, party functions, and identity-based political mobilization.

Based on the reference corpus, the study engages primarily with scholarly works on voting behavior, Islamic politics, political parties, coalition dynamics, and local elections in Indonesia, drawing on both nationally focused and internationally indexed publications. The unit of analysis is not individual voters or electoral outcomes per se, but the analytical interaction between voter behavior transformation, NU-based identity politics, and party electoral performance at the local level, with the 2024 Demak local election serving as a critical empirical reference.

The analytical process involves organizing the literature into key thematic categories voter rationality, religious identity politics, party electoral functions, coalition dynamics, and local political economy followed by an integrative synthesis that connects theoretical arguments and empirical findings to the Demak case. This procedure follows principles of thematic synthesis in qualitative research, emphasizing the integration of meanings across sources to construct a coherent and context-sensitive analytical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

NU-Based Identity Politics and Its Limitations in the Demak Local Election

Religious identity politics, particularly those rooted in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), has long been understood as a key source of PKB's electoral strength across various regions. The historical relationship between PKB and NU is not merely organizational but also symbolic and cultural, given that PKB emerged from the political mobilization of NU constituencies in the post-Reformasi period. Numerous studies position PKB as a political representation of traditional Islamic interests, relying heavily on pesantren networks, religious leaders (kiai), and NU's social structures as mechanisms of electoral mobilization (Armansyah, 2017; Jazuli, 2020).

In Demak Regency, NU-based identity politics has carried particular weight due to the sociological character of the population, which remains deeply embedded in traditional Islamic practices. Religious identity in this context functions not only as a belief system but also as a normative framework shaping social relations, local leadership, and political legitimacy. Consequently, electoral support for PKB has long been assumed to represent the political expression of NU identity among Demak's population.

However, developments in Indonesia's electoral democracy demonstrate that religious identity politics no longer operates in a deterministic manner. Empirical research suggests that religious identity increasingly functions as a source of symbolic legitimacy rather than as a consistently effective instrument of political mobilization (Mujani & Liddle, 2010). While NU identity continues to provide moral and cultural reference points for voters, its translation

into electoral choice is contingent upon candidate characteristics, salient issues, and the evolving relationships between religious elites and political actors.

The 2024 Demak local election illustrates these limitations clearly. NU-based support was fragmented along lines of religious authority, reflecting the increasingly plural and decentralized nature of kiai leadership. Religious authority is no longer singular or hierarchically unified but dispersed across multiple local nodes with divergent political preferences. Personal ties between kiai and candidates, genealogical connections, and local political-economic interests significantly influenced endorsement patterns (Yahya & Sahidin, 2022). As a result, a culturally homogeneous religious base exhibited politically fragmented preferences.

Moreover, younger NU-affiliated voters display a more fluid interpretation of religious identity. For this cohort, NU identity is not necessarily translated into a political obligation to support PKB, but rather understood as a cultural affiliation compatible with diverse political choices. Expanded access to digital media and higher levels of political awareness have encouraged younger voters to engage in more critical evaluations of candidates and parties (Haq, 2023; Jati, 2012).

Accordingly, NU-based identity politics in the 2024 Demak election functioned as an important symbolic backdrop but lacked sufficient force to independently determine electoral outcomes. This limitation underscores the need to conceptualize religious identity as one variable among many in local political competition, with its effectiveness shaped by candidate appeal, campaign strategy, and broader socio-economic dynamics.

PKB's Electoral Functions and the Problem of Candidate Selection

PKB's defeat in the 2024 Demak local election also reflects deeper structural issues related to the party's electoral functions, particularly in the domain of candidate selection. In political party theory, electoral functions encompass candidate recruitment and nomination, campaign strategy formulation, and voter mobilization (Pamungkas, 2011). Electoral success depends heavily on a party's capacity to perform these functions effectively and in ways that are responsive to local socio-political contexts.

Candidate selection emerged as a critical issue in the Demak election. Studies have shown that elitist and closed nomination processes often produce candidates who lack social legitimacy among voters (Pratama et al., 2013; Sianturi & Ekayanta, 2023). In PKB's case, the decision not to renominate an incumbent previously supported by the party created distance between PKB and segments of the electorate that had accumulated electoral experience and performance-based evaluations of prior leadership. In local elections, incumbents typically enjoy advantages such as name recognition, bureaucratic networks, and perceptions of governance stability. By foregoing these advantages, PKB relinquished a significant source of electoral capital.

Instead, PKB nominated a new figure who lacked strong sociological ties to NU's cultural base in Demak (Pemerintah Kabupaten Demak, 2024; Rahmawati, 2024). The candidate did not possess a prominent NU background, whether through pesantren networks, close personal relationships with local kiai, or genealogical connections. This stood in contrast to rival candidates who demonstrated clearer genealogical and symbolic affiliations with NU's socio-religious networks, making them more readily accepted as authentic community representatives.

The absence of such cultural and genealogical proximity weakened the symbolic resonance between PKB's candidate and NU-affiliated voters. In local political contexts like Demak, genealogical ties such as lineage from religious leaders or long-standing engagement with NU communities often function as sources of social trust. Without these attributes, PKB's identity as a party associated with NU did not automatically transfer to the nominated candidate, limiting the party's ability to convert cultural capital into tangible electoral support.

Candidate selection decisions driven primarily by elite-level calculations and structural compromise, rather than grassroots aspirations, ultimately weakened emotional and social attachment between the candidate and PKB's traditional base. NU voters in Demak evaluated not only party affiliation but also whether candidates were perceived as "insiders" who understood local values, traditions, and community interests. When such perceptions were absent,

voters became more rational and open to alternative candidates, even those outside historically supported parties (Pamungkas, 2011).

Thus, PKB's candidate selection problem in the 2024 Demak election reflects not merely a technical electoral loss but a failure to perform electoral functions in a context-sensitive manner. The disconnect between NU's social base, prior incumbent experience, and the nominated candidate underscores the limits of structural and symbolic party strength in the absence of socially embedded candidacy.

Beyond candidate selection, PKB's campaign strategy also faced significant challenges. Campaign messaging emphasized religious identity symbols and the strength of a large governing coalition as primary electoral assets. Yet in a local electorate that has become increasingly pragmatic and evaluative, such approaches were misaligned with voter expectations. Research consistently shows that local election voters prioritize candidate competence, programmatic clarity, and the ability to address everyday concerns such as economic welfare, public service delivery, and local governance (Fitriyah, 2017; Fitriyah et al., 2021; Jati, 2012).

When campaign communication foregrounds symbolic legitimacy and formal party endorsements while failing to articulate substantive policy agendas persuasively, its resonance becomes limited. In Demak, this mismatch was particularly consequential, as religious identity no longer functioned as a decisive electoral determinant. While NU identity retained symbolic value, its effectiveness depended heavily on candidate credibility and the perceived relevance of proposed programs. Consequently, PKB's campaign suffered from a gap between symbolic messaging and the rational orientations of local voters.

These strategic challenges were further compounded by the configuration of a broad electoral coalition supporting PKB's candidate. Coalition literature suggests that alliances composed of multiple parties with divergent interests, policy orientations, and voter bases often encounter coordination problems and fragmented support (Hiker, 1962; Pratama et al., 2013; Sianturi & Ekayanta, 2023). Such coalitions may appear cohesive at the elite level while remaining weak in grassroots electoral implementation.

In Demak, competing interests among coalition partners hindered clear role allocation and consistent political messaging. Each party pursued its own strategic calculations, complicating efforts to construct a unified and recognizable campaign narrative. Rather than reinforcing candidate positioning, the large coalition blurred political identity and diluted substantive agendas, weakening campaign effectiveness and limiting PKB's capacity to consolidate electoral support (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Mujani & Liddle, 2010).

From a theoretical perspective, this case reinforces the argument that coalition size does not necessarily correlate positively with electoral success. On the contrary, greater coalition heterogeneity increases coordination costs and obscures political cues received by voters. For an electorate that is increasingly rational and critical, such ambiguity may prompt voters to seek alternative candidates perceived as clearer in identity, agenda, and local embeddedness.

In sum, PKB's defeat in the 2024 Demak local election represents the cumulative outcome of failures in performing electoral functions in an adaptive and integrated manner. Candidate selection that lacked deep roots in NU's social base, campaign strategies insufficiently attuned to local voter orientations, and a large but operationally fragmented coalition demonstrate that PKB's structural and cultural capital could not be effectively translated into electoral victory without context-sensitive electoral management responsive to local social and political dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This article concludes that PKB's defeat in the 2024 Demak local election reflects a fundamental shift in voter behavior and the evolving dynamics of local democracy in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that strong cultural and historical foundations particularly PKB's long-standing association with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) no longer

automatically translate into electoral success. Local voters increasingly position themselves as evaluative and context-sensitive political actors, whose electoral choices are shaped not solely by identity affiliation but by assessments of candidate credibility, the relevance of proposed agendas, and parties' capacities to respond to concrete societal needs. In this respect, the study's objective of examining voter behavior transformation and PKB's electoral challenges in Demak is addressed through the conclusion that identity politics functions primarily as symbolic capital that supports, rather than determines, electoral outcomes in local elections. Theoretically, this study contributes by refining the understanding of identity-based party politics in local democracies, demonstrating how religious identity operates as a contingent and mediating resource whose electoral effectiveness depends on organizational performance and contextual voter rationality.

Based on these conclusions, the study recommends that political parties particularly those rooted in religious identities adopt more adaptive electoral strategies aligned with changing voter orientations. Candidate selection processes should be designed in a more open and context-sensitive manner, taking into account candidates' social embeddedness, cultural proximity, and local legitimacy. Campaign strategies should move beyond an overreliance on identity symbolism or coalition strength and instead prioritize substantive, programmatic communication capable of addressing voters' everyday concerns. In addition, coalition management should focus on enhancing grassroots-level electoral effectiveness rather than remaining confined to elite-level agreements.

For the advancement of academic inquiry, future research is encouraged to complement literature-based approaches with field-based methods such as in-depth interviews or voter surveys. Such approaches would provide richer empirical insights into voter preferences and the interactions between political and religious elites at the local level. Integrating these methods is expected to deepen understanding of voter behavior transformation and contribute more comprehensively to the study of local democracy and electoral politics in Indonesia.

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