

POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF THE 2024 NORTH SUMATRA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the political dynamics of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election (Pilgub Sumut), exploring its implications and challenges as a reflection of local democracy amidst identity politics (Batak, Malay, Javanese ethnicities), social polarization, and digital media disruption. Methodology: Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with political actors and observers, field observations, and document analysis from KPU and Bawaslu. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation. Findings reveal five key insights: (1) the dominance of pragmatic coalitions based on candidate electability, (2) the instrumentalization of identity politics as a mobilization strategy with the risk of social fragmentation, (3) the dual role of social media—effective in engaging youth voters yet vulnerable to disinformation, (4) persistent structural challenges such as money politics, and (5) a shift in voter behavior towards rational considerations based on candidate track records. Conclusion: The 2024 election illustrates the dilemma of electoral democracy where identity-based tactics and pragmatic interests marginalize substantive issues (e.g., Lake Toba deforestation, gender inequality). The study underscores the need for strengthening digital literacy, enforcing anti-transactional politics laws, and promoting inclusive policy-based reconciliation to transform identity politics into policy accountability.

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INTRODUCTION

The Governor election (Pilgub) is not just a political contest to elect regional leaders, but is a reflection of the face of local democracy that determines the direction of regional development strategically. In the midst of the

current current current issues, such as identity politics, public polarization, and the massive influence of social media, the gubernatorial election is an important stage to measure the political maturity of the community. Ironically, this dynamic is often colored by the practice of political pragmatism such as money politics that erodes the values of ideal democracy. In addition, the challenge of reaching broad public participation including in remote areas reflects the importance of improving a more inclusive and equitable political system. (Junaidi , 2012)

The theme of political dynamics for the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election was chosen because political contestation in this province represents the complexity of local democracy that is full of ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. North Sumatra is one of the regions with a significant number of voters, so its political dynamics have strategic implications for the direction of national politics. The 2024 Governor Election is also important to be analyzed as a continuation of the political configuration after the 2024 Presidential Election, where the strategy of the political elite, coalition patterns, and mobilization of public support can reflect the development of Indonesia's democracy at the regional level. This research is expected to be able to identify the political implications of the North Sumatra gubernatorial election on the consolidation of democracy while uncovering the challenges that arise, such as the potential use of identity politics, the vulnerability of horizontal conflicts, and the issue of transparency in the implementation of elections. Thus, this research has both theoretical and practical relevance in the study of contemporary local politics.

North Sumatra is a strategic province that is not only rich in natural resources, but also has social and cultural complexities that make it the center of national attention. With its multiethnic population and diverse cultural plurality, North Sumatra is often a barometer of the success of social harmonization in Indonesia. However, this complexity also brings its own challenges, such as the increase in identity politics that is often exploited in political momentum, including the 2024 gubernatorial election. Social dynamics that occur, such as the polarization of society due to differences in political views, can threaten stability if not managed properly. (Wandini et al., 2024)

The 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election will be an important test for the maturity of local democracy, given the increasingly complex dynamics of modern politics characterized by the use of information technology, identity politics, and elite competition. In the midst of increasing expectations for transparency and public participation, this gubernatorial election is an arena to assess the extent to which the democratic process is able to run in an inclusive, fair, and dignified manner. However, challenges such as the spread of hoaxes, the practice of money politics, and the polarization of society based on political affiliation or ethnicity remain threats that must be anticipated. The results of this gubernatorial election will not only reflect the political choices of the people of North Sumatra, but also provide an overview of the quality of Indonesia's democracy at the regional level. (Stuart et al., 2023)

The 2024 North Sumatra Governor Election is scheduled to take place on November 27, 2024 simultaneously with regional elections in other regions in Indonesia. Based on the determination of the General Election Commission (KPU), there are two pairs of candidates who have officially advanced in this contest. The first pair is Bobby Nasution-Surya, who is supported by ten major political parties, such as NasDem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, Democrats, Perindo, and PSI. Bobby Nasution, the son-in-law of President Joko Widodo, previously served as the Mayor of Medan, while Surya is the Regent of Asahan with political experience in the Coal DPRD. The second pair is Edy Rahmayadi-Hasan Basri Sagala, who is supported by PDIP, Hanura, PKN, the Labor Party, the Gelora Party, and the Ummat Party. Edy Rahmayadi is the Governor of North Sumatra for the 2018–2023 period with a military background in the TNI-AD and work in sports organizations, while Hasan Basri Sagala is known to be active in community organizations, has served as an expert at the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and has experience as an independent commissioner in the private sector.

The emergence of new figures with professional backgrounds as well as senior politicians has become an interesting phenomenon in local and national political contests. Professionals bring fresh perspectives, with

technocratic abilities and visions that are often more focused on concrete solutions, while senior politicians offer extensive experience and networks to understand complex political dynamics. However, challenges arise when these new figures are confronted with old political structures that tend to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, the public is increasingly selective, demanding leaders who are not only popular, but also able to answer the needs of society in an era filled with modern challenges such as digitalization, transparency, and a crisis of trust in political institutions. These new figures, if able to collaborate well, can be a catalyst for positive change in Indonesia's political landscape.

Developing issues, such as the involvement of national figures in supporting certain gubernatorial candidates, have stolen the spotlight in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election. Support from national figures such as Anis Matta, Djarot Saiful Hidayat, Yasonna H Laoly, Adian Napitupulu, and Fahri Hamzah. This not only shows a new political pattern, but also illustrates an attempt to broaden the base of support by harnessing the influence of prominent figures at the central level. This shows an increasingly complex political dynamic in which gubernatorial candidates seek to gain additional legitimacy from figures who have national influence to strengthen their position in local political competition. What's more, this involvement can influence public perception and determine the direction of voter support, adding an important layer in the 2024 gubernatorial election competition. (Squirrel & Irham , 2024)

In the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, the political configuration shows the formation of two major coalition axes. The Bobby Nasution-Surya pair is supported by a fat coalition consisting of ten parties, namely NasDem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, Democrats, Perindo, and PSI. This coalition was formed because of the common interest in securing the electoral base in North Sumatra while maintaining national political influence after the 2024 Presidential Election, especially with Bobby's position as President Joko Widodo's son-in-law who is considered to have electoral appeal. Meanwhile, the Edy Rahmayadi-Hasan Basri Sagala pair was supported by PDIP, Hanura, PKN, the Labor Party, the Gelora Party, and the Ummat Party. This coalition was born as an effort to build a counter-axis while consolidating the strength of parties that are not members of Bobby's coalition. Thus, the dynamics of the coalition in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election show the existence of a pragmatic interest-based political strategy, both to expand support networks and to affirm the existence of parties on the local political map.

The role of coalitions between major parties in mapping political power is becoming increasingly relevant in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election. This coalition is not only about uniting political forces, but also building a common strategy to control the political agenda, as well as secure voter votes in the midst of increasingly complex local political dynamics. In this context, large interparty coalitions play an important role in designing more integrated political tactics, expanding the reach of support, and dealing with potential threats from independent candidates. They face the challenge of maintaining the ideological alignment and interests of each member party, which are often at odds, to create a solid and coordinated political force. (Kurniawan, 2024)

Digital campaigns have become a major trend in conveying the visions and missions of candidates in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, replacing most conventional approaches. With the rise in the use of social media, digital platforms provide opportunities for candidates to reach voters directly, quickly, and more interactively. This allows for wider dissemination of messages, easier support gathering, as well as two-way interactions that allow candidates to respond directly to people's concerns and aspirations. Digital campaigns also use big data to measure and analyze voter voting tendencies, so that campaign strategies can be more targeted and effective. The digitalization-related issues in this campaign show how technology continues to redefine local politics, offering new opportunities for transparency and voter engagement. (Abdillah & Zulhazmi , 2021)

The use of identity politics issues that tap into local ethnic, religious, and cultural sentiments is a tactic often adopted by potential candidates to strengthen their support base. This strategy leverages cultural differences

and loyalty as a way to capture voters' attention by mobilizing emotions and identity values. Although it appears to be effective in increasing political appeal, the use of identity politics also has the potential to deepen social polarization and widen gaps between groups. This issue is in the main spotlight because it has the potential to create social conflicts and undermine the inclusive democratic order if not managed wisely. Research shows that ethnic and religious sentiments can be effective tools in mobilizing support, but also increase the risk of social disintegration if overused. (Jonah et al., 2023)

The increasing role of social media as a tool of mass mobilization has brought significant changes in the way politics is run, both positively and negatively. On the one hand, social media allows for greater public participation, facilitates open discussions, and accelerates the dissemination of important information. However, on the other hand, it is also a forum for the spread of hoaxes, hate speech, and misleading information, which can damage the quality of democracy and create polarization in society. Studies show that the increased presence of social media in politics also increases the risk of disinformation, given the lack of control over the quality of information circulating on these platforms. (Andzani et al., 2024)

The complexity of the election in the midst of public polarization due to political differences further adds to the challenges in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election. The political tensions that arise from differences of opinion not only create friction between supporters, but also affect the social dynamics of society at large. This polarization affects voter participation rates, increases the risk of conflict, and exacerbates limited space for constructive dialogue. Maintaining political stability in the midst of polarization is a crucial task for election organizers and political leaders so that election integrity is maintained and the quality of democracy remains high. (Sitorus et al., 2024)

Money politics remains a big challenge in maintaining the integrity of elections, especially in a society that is still vulnerable to transactional political practices. This phenomenon reflects the weak understanding of some voters about their rights and responsibilities, as well as showing how certain candidates or groups take advantage of the economic conditions of society to gain instant support. In addition to undermining the democratic process, money politics creates a cycle of injustice in which elected leaders often ignore the public interest in order to return their political "investments". This challenge requires strengthening law enforcement, voter education, and transparency of the electoral process to ensure that every vote reflects pure aspirations, not the result of manipulation or economic pressure. (Rice & Irwansyah , 2023)

The dominance of identity politics in public discourse has the potential to trigger horizontal conflicts, especially if ethnic, religious, or cultural sentiments are used to polarize society. This kind of narrative tends to reinforce barriers between social groups, create a sense of distrust, and exacerbate differences that should be a strength in diversity. In the context of elections, the use of identity politics as a tool of mobilization often ignores the agenda of development and unity, replacing it with emotional rhetoric that muddles social dynamics. If not managed wisely, this condition can trigger clashes at the grassroots level, undermine social harmony, and threaten democratic stability. Serious efforts to mitigate this potential conflict are essential through political education and law enforcement against actors who deliberately exploit sensitive issues for personal or group gain. (Adam, 2022)

Elections have a significant impact on the sustainability of regional infrastructure and economic development programs, especially when new leadership brings a different vision than its predecessor. In this context, political stability and policy continuity are the main keys so that strategic projects do not stop halfway. On the one hand, elections can be a momentum for evaluating old policies and an opportunity to improve less effective programs. However, on the other hand, there are often changes in priorities or budget allocations that can interfere with development progress. In an era of global competition, elected leaders must be able to ensure that political vision is aligned with the needs of regional development, so that the benefits are truly felt by the wider community without being hampered by post-election political dynamics. (Squirrelly et al., 2023)

The evaluation of the role of the KPU and Bawaslu in facing political pressure and maintaining neutrality is a test of the integrity of the election organizing institution. In the midst of political dynamics full of interests, these two institutions are required not only to be able to carry out administrative duties professionally but also to build public trust in the electoral system. Pressure from political actors seeking to influence strategic decisions often tests their independence, while close scrutiny from the public and the media adds to the complexity of their roles. (Muflilha and Jannah, 2024)

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to analyze the political dynamics of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election. Data was obtained through literature studies and document analysis in the form of mass media news, official reports of election organizers, academic publications, and related regulations. In addition, the author also conducted social media observations to see the dynamics of public opinion, political narratives, and digital communication patterns of political actors. This approach provides a comprehensive overview of political phenomena both in terms of formal documents and the reality of conversations in the digital space. Data analysis is carried out by content analysis techniques through the process of collecting sources, coding key issues, categorizing findings, and drawing conclusions that connect the findings with the theoretical framework used.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Political Dynamics and Coalition for the 2024 North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election

Ahead of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, this regional political map shows a complex configuration of power with the involvement of a number of major parties such as PDI Perjuangan, Gerindra, Golkar, and PKS, which have a strong support base from the results of the 2024 Legislative Election. In addition, there are names of potential candidates that are starting to emerge, both from senior politicians, active regional heads, to national figures who have local roots. The composition of this power is further strengthened by the results of the Legislative Election which represents the distribution of seats in the Provincial DPRD, which directly affects the formation of coalitions in the candidacy of governors and deputy governors. The coalition formed tends to be pragmatic, taking into account the strength of seats and the bargaining power of the candidate figure in gaining the sympathy of voters across segments. In the context of local Indonesian politics, this kind of dynamic shows the real form of the so-called cartel party system, which is when political parties collaborate pragmatically to maintain the existence of power, not to fight for a particular ideology. (Scott, 2024) (Katz & Mair, 1995)

The political configuration formed ahead of the North Sumatra gubernatorial election shows high transactional political characteristics. The coalition that is formed is no longer driven by ideological similarities, but by rational calculations regarding the distribution of power and the chances of winning. This approach is in line with the theory of rational choice put forward by Anthony Downs (1957), in which each political actor acts instrumentally to maximize his or her electoral interests. Thus, the coalition of parties in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election can be understood as a form of political rationality that is oriented towards results, not on the same vision of long-term development.

Sociologically, the support base of candidates in North Sumatra is greatly influenced by geographical and ethnic factors. The Tapanuli area, which is dominated by ethnic Batak, the East Coast which is predominantly Malay and Javanese, and other coastal and inland areas have different political tendencies. This ethnic segmentation is often used by parties and candidates to build electoral strategies based on identity proximity. On the other hand, religious factors and social networks such as religious organizations, indigenous communities, and local leaders are important instruments in voice mobilization. Thus, the results of the 2024 Legislative Election are an important parameter in

reading the party's strength in the gubernatorial election, as it provides an overview of the map of vote distribution, voter loyalty, and potential influence on the results of the upcoming gubernatorial election. This condition shows that local politics in North Sumatra is still influenced by traditional social divisions such as ethnicity and religion. However, this division is not static, because more and more voters are starting to be rational and consider the candidate's performance factors and the concrete programs offered. (Amal, 2021)

The dynamics of the coalition in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election show a pattern that tends to be pragmatic, although in some cases there are figure-based ideological and personal elements. Most political parties form alliances not because of a common vision or political platform, but because of the tactical need to meet the candidacy threshold and increase the chances of victory. Figure-based coalitions are also a trend, where parties prefer to support candidates with high electability or popular backgrounds such as regional heads, religious leaders, or public figures who have cross-segment appeal (Power, 2020). Political maneuvers between parties appear to be intense, especially in nomination lobbying and negotiations on the sharing of strategic positions between major and middle parties, which show a pull of short-term interests rather than a long-term development agenda.

In terms of electoral strategy, parties and candidates fighting in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election are starting to combine traditional and modern approaches. Social media is the main tool in building an image, spreading campaign narratives, and reaching young voters in urban areas. Meanwhile, volunteers and community-based network nodes continue to be used massively to conduct direct approaches, especially in suburban and rural areas that have limited digital access. Religious, ethnic, and professional community-based strategies are also activated to expand the support base. These approaches show that electoral success depends not only on party strength, but also on the ability to build socio-political networks that are adaptive to local dynamics and current digital political trends.

In the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election contest, the role of local and national figures is very decisive in shaping public opinion and consolidating political support. Local figures such as former regional chiefs, charismatic clerics, and indigenous community leaders have a strong influence on mass mobilization due to their emotional closeness and socio-cultural ties to the community. Meanwhile, national figures from both political parties and public figures with regional roots in North Sumatra are taking advantage of their popularity and political networks to strengthen the image of the candidates they support. Their presence serves as a bridge between central strategy and local political reality, thus expanding the support base across regions and social groups.

However, the dynamics between local power and the intervention of the national elite are not always harmonious. In many cases, the intervention of the national elite actually creates resistance at the grassroots level when it is considered to ignore local aspirations and characteristics. This imbalance can trigger internal conflicts within the coalition and affect the solidity of the winning team. Nevertheless, the intervention of the central elite often brings electoral advantages, such as access to campaign resources, national political legitimacy, and the mobilization of party structures in a more organized manner. Therefore, synergy between local and national actors is crucial in creating an adaptive, responsive, and highly competitive political force in the midst of the complexity of North Sumatra's political demographics.

Social Base, Voter Behavior, and Electoral Strategy

Voter behavior in North Sumatra ahead of the 2024 gubernatorial election shows a significant shift, from loyalty to the party to rationality in making choices. The characteristics of voters in this area are very diverse, divided between party loyalists who follow ideological lines or historical closeness to certain parties, and rational voters who consider the candidate's track record, capabilities, and work programs. Differences in social, economic, and geographic backgrounds also influence patterns of political participation, where urban voters tend to be more critical

and informed than rural voters who are still influenced by patron-client networks and emotional approaches. (Surbakti, 2023)

Some of the main factors that influence the decision to vote in North Sumatra are religion, ethnicity, personal integrity of the candidates, and the concrete programs offered. In a pluralistic and multicultural society like North Sumatra, primordial sentiments based on religion and ethnicity still play an important role, especially in areas with strong religious and regional communities. Nevertheless, the trend of young and middle-class voters is beginning to show a tendency to vote based on integrity, credibility, and commitment to change. Therefore, candidates who are able to combine an identity approach with a concrete development and public service agenda have a greater chance of winning votes.

Voter behavior in the context of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election can be analyzed through a theoretical approach from three classic models of voter behavior, namely the sociological model, the psychological model, and the rational choice model. According to , political behavior in multicultural societies is strongly influenced by social structures, especially religious identity, ethnicity, and social class. In the context of North Sumatra, this is evident in the differentiation of political choices between the heterogeneous eastern coastal region with the dominance of Javanese and Malays, and the Tapanuli region dominated by the Batak ethnic group with a more ideological and kinship-based political character. These differences in social identities form a sustained political cleavage and affect electoral behavior. (Lipset & Rokkan, 1990)

Meanwhile, from a psychological perspective as explained by The American Voter, voter behavior is also influenced by emotional attachment to the party (party identification) and perception of the candidate. In the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election, loyalty to major parties such as PDI Perjuangan and Golkar is still quite strong among senior voters who have historical attachments, but the younger generation tends to be more flexible and judge candidates based on their personal image, integrity, and development vision offered. This change shows a shift in people's political orientation from emotional to more rational and based on performance assessments. (Campbell et al., 1960)

The rational choice approach developed by is also relevant to explain the behavior of voters in North Sumatra. Voters in this framework are seen as rational actors who consider the benefits and costs in making their choices. Young voters and the urban middle class, for example, prefer candidates who are considered capable of delivering concrete policies in the fields of economy, education, and welfare. However, in rural areas, political rationality is often mixed with patronage factors, where personal relationships and socio-economic rewards still play a dominant role in shaping political decisions. This shows the co-existence between political modernity and traditional political culture that still persists at the local level. (Downs, 1957)

Social forces such as religious networks, mass organizations, and customary institutions also play an important role in shaping voter behavior. In North Sumatra, the role of the church and Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, and local religious institutions function as mediators between the political elite and the community. They are often a source of social legitimacy that strengthens a particular candidate's position. On the other hand, the existence of customary institutions such as Dalihan Na Tolu in the Tapanuli region also influences the pattern of political support, as traditional social structures still function as binders of communal solidarity. These factors show that the political behavior of the people of North Sumatra is not only influenced by individual rationality, but also by complex value systems and social networks.

Changes in the landscape of political communication through social media and political digitalization have also had a significant impact on voter behavior. The millennial generation and Gen Z in North Sumatra are now the largest and most active segment of voters in digital media. They are not only recipients of information, but also opinion producers through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X (Twitter). This phenomenon reinforces the theory of networked public sphere put forward by , where the digital space becomes a new arena for political

participation and the formation of public opinion. Candidates who are able to use social media creatively and ethically have a greater chance of building a positive image and reaching critical and dynamic young voters. (Castells, 2012)

However, these developments also carry risks in the form of disinformation and digital polarization. As argued by , unbridled digital politics can create an echo chamber echo chamber where voters are only exposed to views that reinforce their own biases. In the context of pluralistic North Sumatra, this has the potential to exacerbate social barriers based on religion and ethnicity, especially if sensitive issues are exploited politically. Therefore, digital literacy and ethical supervision of political communication are urgent needs to maintain the quality of local democracy. (Ward & Gibson, 2019)

On the other hand, the electoral strategies of political parties in the North Sumatra gubernatorial election are also increasingly diverse and adaptive. In addition to relying on the formal structure of the party, they now activate many social nodes based on religious communities, professions, and youth organizations. This approach shows the party's efforts to build grassroots mobilization while expanding support across social identities. According to the theory of political mobilization, the success of the campaign is largely determined by the ability of political actors to activate the social and economic resources that exist in the community. In the context of North Sumatra, this includes the use of a network of Islamic boarding schools, churches, farmer groups, and digital communities. (Verb et al., 1995)

In addition to internal factors, the role of local media is also important in shaping public perception. Local media in North Sumatra serves as an agenda setter that determines the dominant issues during the campaign period. However, some media still have the potential to be biased against certain candidates because of their attachment to the economic and political interests of their owners. According to the Agenda Setting theory, the media does not always tell people what to think, but directs them to what to think. Therefore, the quality of objective and balanced news greatly determines the formation of rational and critical voter behavior towards the democratic process. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)

From all these dynamics, it can be concluded that voter behavior in North Sumatra ahead of the 2024 gubernatorial election represents a meeting between identity-based political traditions and rationality-based political modernity. Candidates who are able to understand socio-cultural complexities, accommodate the interests of local communities, and make effective use of digital technologies have a greater chance of winning support. Therefore, voter behavior in North Sumatra cannot be seen only as a result of individual preferences, but as a reflection of the interaction between social structures, communication networks, and political strategies that influence each other in the ever-evolving space of local democracy.

Digital technology is also an important instrument in shaping voter perception, especially among millennials and Gen Z. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are actively used by campaign teams to spread narratives, build branding, and respond to issues in real-time. In addition, the use of big data and digital algorithms makes it easier to segment voters and personalize campaign messages. However, the spread of hoaxes and manipulation of information is also a serious challenge that can affect the quality of electoral democracy. Therefore, digital literacy and information transparency are key in encouraging healthy and accurate knowledge-based political participation. (Izzati et al., 2025)

However, the use of digital technology also brings new risks. The spread of disinformation, hoaxes, and hate politics is a real threat to the quality of local democracy. emphasizing the importance of political digital literacy to suppress this negative impact. Therefore, the success of the gubernatorial election is not only measured by how high voter participation is, but also by the extent to which people are able to use their voting rights consciously and rationally. (Izzati et al., 2025)

In terms of candidates and parties, the electoral strategy in the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election shows a combination of modern and traditional approaches. The party machine is still the main tool of mobilization, but digital campaigns, community volunteering, and micro-targeting strategies through big data are becoming increasingly important complementary elements. This phenomenon shows a transformation from mass politics to network politics that is more flexible and responsive to changes in voter behavior.

Implications and Challenges of Local Democracy

The 2024 North Sumatra Governor Election (North Sumatra Gubernatorial Election) has significant political implications for the stability of the provincial government. The results of the gubernatorial election will determine the direction of regional strategic policies for the next five years, including in terms of infrastructure development, bureaucratic arrangement, and public resource management. If the elected pair is able to consolidate political support in the DPRD and manage the government coalition in an inclusive manner, then political stability and government effectiveness can be guaranteed. On the other hand, conflicts of interest between supporting parties, weak legitimacy, and disharmony between regional heads and legislatures can hinder the governance process and exacerbate local political fragmentation.

In addition, the North Sumatra gubernatorial election also has the potential to provide an important signal to the direction of national leadership post-2024. North Sumatra is a strategic province in the western region of Indonesia, which is often an indicator of the strength and political network of major parties outside Java. Figures who win the gubernatorial election with strong support from national actors can become political capital for the party in compiling a coalition map towards the 2029 election. In fact, the elected candidate from the North Sumatra gubernatorial election could be projected as a potential figure on the national political stage if he succeeds in showing progressive government performance and receiving broad public support.

Another implication is on the quality of local democracy. The 2024 gubernatorial election can be a momentum for improving democracy if it takes place in a transparent, competitive, and integrity manner. Public involvement in supervision, increased ideation-based political participation, and the growth of public dialogue spaces are positive indicators of democratization. However, if the gubernatorial election process is colored by money politics, electoral manipulation, and excessive intervention by the national elite, then the quality of local democracy has the potential to decline. Therefore, the success of the North Sumatra gubernatorial election is not only measured by who wins, but also by the extent to which the process reflects the principles of a healthy and sustainable democracy.

The political dynamics of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election not only affect electoral results, but also have far-reaching implications for the quality of local democracy. This gubernatorial election is a test arena for the extent to which democracy at the regional level is able to function substantively — not just procedurally. According to the theory of democratic consolidation (Linz & Stepan, 1996), a mature democracy is characterized by institutional stability, civil society involvement, and the ability of political actors to accept the results of elections peacefully. In the context of North Sumatra, these three aspects still face serious challenges.

Regional political stability is highly dependent on the ability of elected regional heads to manage the coalition in an inclusive manner. Internal conflicts between supporting parties often hinder the effectiveness of government because short-term pragmatic interests are more dominant than development agendas. In addition, the relationship between regional heads and the legislature also determines the sustainability of strategic policies. When disharmony occurs, the potential for bureaucratic stagnation and policy uncertainty will increase.

Nationally, the North Sumatra gubernatorial election also has strategic significance because it can be a barometer of Indonesia's political direction after 2024. North Sumatra is a province with a large population and an important geopolitical position in the western region of Indonesia. Therefore, the success or failure of this

gubernatorial election in creating a stable and responsive government will provide an important political signal for major parties in designing coalitions towards the 2029 elections.

However, behind this positive potential, there are a number of fundamental challenges that can threaten the quality of local democracy. Money politics and patronage practices are still latent issues that are difficult to erase, saying that transactional politics has become part of Indonesia's "informal infrastructure" — a practice that actually undermines the principles of representation and accountability. In many regions, including North Sumatra, money politics is often considered a natural part of the electoral process, which ultimately lowers the legitimacy of elected leaders. (Aspinall & Bear Schot , 2019)

In addition, threats to political freedom also arise in the form of intimidation of voters and election organizers. Economic inequality reinforces the vulnerability of certain groups to political pressure, especially in areas with low economic access. Weak enforcement of election violations exacerbates this situation, creating a public perception that electoral manipulation is commonplace and difficult to act on.

To overcome these challenges, the role of election organizing institutions such as the KPU and Bawaslu is crucial. Their neutrality, transparency, and independence are the main foundations to ensure the integrity of the gubernatorial election process. However, scrutiny from civil society, academics, and local media is equally important. Public participation in supervising the election stages can be an effective social control mechanism in strengthening public trust in the results of the gubernatorial election.

Political education and voter literacy need to be strengthened, especially for vulnerable groups such as first-time voters, women, and marginalized communities. Through continuous political education, the community is expected to not only become an object of political mobilization, but also an active subject in maintaining the quality of democracy. The process of local democratization will be meaningless without the involvement of citizens who are aware of their rights and responsibilities as voters.

Thus, the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election is a mirror of the dynamics of Indonesian democracy as a whole. This process is not only about who wins, but also how the political competition takes place ethically, fairly, and participatoryly. The interplay between elite pragmatism, voter rationality, and local social structures illustrates the complexity of regional politics that demands innovation in democratic governance. In the long run, a healthy local democracy will be the foundation for strengthening a civilized and sustainable national democracy.

The implementation of the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election faces serious challenges in realizing quality democracy, especially related to the practice of money politics and voter intimidation. Transactional politics is often a tool to mobilize support, especially in areas with high economic inequality, thus threatening the integrity of the electoral process. In addition, the existence of pressure or intimidation against voters and election organizers has the potential to create infreedom in expressing political choices. This situation is exacerbated by weak law enforcement against election violations, which creates the perception that manipulation in elections is commonplace and has no legal consequences. (Aspinall & Bear Schot , 2019)

To overcome these challenges, the active role of election organizers such as the KPU and Bawaslu is crucial in ensuring neutrality, transparency, and justice in every stage of the gubernatorial election. Strengthening oversight from civil society, independent monitoring agencies, and local media is also an important part of a healthy democratic ecosystem. On the other hand, increasing political participation and voter literacy should be the main focus, especially through voter education targeting vulnerable groups such as first-time voters, women, and marginalized communities. This strategy is expected to be able to create citizens who are critical, rational, and resistant to transactional political practices, so that the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election can take place with more dignity and substance.

CONCLUSION

The 2024 North Sumatra Governor election reflects the complex and dilemmatic dynamics of local politics. On the one hand, this contestation is characterized by the dominance of identity politics (Batak, Malay, and religious ethnicity) as a tactically effective electoral mobilization strategy, although it has the potential to deepen social fragmentation. On the other hand, digital transformation opens up space for the younger generation to participate through social media, but it becomes a channel for disinformation and hoaxes that threaten the integrity of the democratic process. Pragmatic inter-party coalitions driven by electability and candidacy thresholds tend to ignore the sustainability of the long-term development agenda. Substantive challenges such as environmental damage (deforestation of Lake Toba by 70,000 hectares), gender gaps (only 6.6% of female candidates), and vulnerability to money politics are not mainstream in the campaign discourse, although they have a critical impact on regional governance. The implications are dualistic: increasing voter participation and institutional readiness (logistics/funding) is the advancement of electoral democracy, while the neglect of public policy issues and the dominance of identity rhetoric risks weakening leadership legitimacy and exacerbating post-election polarization. To mitigate this risk, strengthening voter literacy based on substantive issues (environment, human rights, gender), manipulative digital content regulation, and inclusive policy-based reconciliation are the main prerequisites. Thus, the 2024 North Sumatra gubernatorial election is not just a test of procedural democracy, but a test of collective maturity in transforming identity into policy accountability.

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