

## POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF CIGARETTE FACTORY WORKERS IN THE 2024 KUDUS REGIONAL ELECTION: PATRON-CLIENT DYNAMICS AND ELECTORAL PRAGMATISM

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the political mobilization of cigarette factory workers in the 2024 Kudus Regional Head Election, focusing on patron-client dynamics and electoral pragmatism mediated by the Federasi Serikat Pekerja Rokok, Tembakau, Makanan, dan Minuman Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (FSP RTMM-SPSI). Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with union elites, workers, campaign teams, and candidate representatives, and documentation analysis. The findings show that mobilization operated through a hierarchical brokerage chain linking candidate pairs, union leaders, foremen, and rank-and-file workers, with material inducements serving as consolidating instruments. Workers' electoral pragmatism was shaped not only by economic precarity but also by institutional dependency on union-mediated welfare access, including tobacco excise revenue-sharing funds. Theoretically, this study contributes to clientelism literature by demonstrating how industrial labor unions function as structured electoral brokers within subnational democratic competition, extending patron-client analysis beyond dyadic exchange to multilayered organizational hierarchies. The novelty of this research lies in its sector-specific focus on labor-based electoral mobilization in an industrially concentrated region, highlighting how workplace hierarchies and welfare intermediation institutionalize clientelistic alignment in local elections.

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### INTRODUCTION

Post-decentralization electoral politics in Indonesia has been widely characterized by the persistence of clientelism within formally competitive democratic institutions. Studies such as those by Aspinall and Sukmajati

(2016) and Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) demonstrate that direct local elections have transformed subnational arenas into sites of intense patronage competition, where socially cohesive and numerically concentrated groups become prime targets of political mobilization. Within this framework, patron-client relations are understood as asymmetrical yet reciprocal exchanges in which patrons distribute material or symbolic resources in return for political loyalty (Berenscho 2018; Scott, 1972; Maczak, 2018). Political participation under such arrangements tends to be mobilized rather than autonomous, as Huntington and Nelson (1994) argue, meaning that electoral engagement is structured through elite coordination and organizational hierarchies rather than grounded in ideological conviction. In contexts marked by weak party identification and limited programmatic differentiation, transactional electoral behavior becomes instrumentally rational for voters (Muhtadi, 2013).

Although the literature on Indonesian clientelism is extensive, most studies focus on informal networks, village-level brokers, or individualized vote-buying practices. Meanwhile, research on labor politics in Southeast Asia (Neureiter, 2013; Caraway & Ford, 2020; Caraway, 2023) primarily emphasizes labor's role in democratization processes and regulatory struggles, rather than examining labor unions as structured electoral brokers within subnational contests. Consequently, there remains a significant analytical gap regarding how institutionalized labor organizations function as coordinated infrastructures for clientelistic mobilization in local elections, particularly in regions with high industrial concentration.

The 2024 Regional Head Election in Kabupaten Kudus provides a strategic empirical site to address this gap. As one of Indonesia's major centers of the kretek cigarette industry, Kudus hosts nearly 80.000 factory workers organized under the Federasi Serikat Pekerja Rokok, Tembakau, Makanan, dan Minuman Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (FSP RTMM-SPSI). The workforce's numerical weight within the electorate, combined with its organizational cohesion and dependence on union-mediated welfare access, creates a structured mobilization infrastructure that extends beyond sporadic vote-buying. In this setting, electoral pragmatism is not merely an individual moral disposition but a structurally conditioned rationality shaped by economic precarity, gendered labor segmentation, hierarchical workplace relations, and institutionalized access to material benefits.

The central problem, therefore, lies in the limited theoretical understanding of how formal labor union hierarchies operate as multilayered electoral brokerage mechanisms within decentralized democratic competition. Existing scholarship insufficiently explains how industrial labor structures transform clientelistic exchange from individualized transactions into coordinated organizational mobilization linking candidate elites, union leadership, and rank-and-file workers. This study addresses that gap by analyzing the mechanisms through which cigarette factory workers were politically mobilized in the 2024 Kudus election, examining the patron-client networks connecting candidate pairs and FSP RTMM-SPSI leadership, and investigating how workers' electoral pragmatism interacts with institutional dependency. Through this analysis, the article seeks to refine theoretical debates on clientelism and mobilized participation by demonstrating how industrial labor organizations can institutionalize and routinize clientelistic alignment within local democratic processes.

## METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the mechanisms of political mobilization targeting cigarette factory workers in the 2024 Regional Head Election in Kabupaten Kudus. The selection of a qualitative design is grounded in the research objective, which seeks to understand relational dynamics, brokerage processes, and embedded patron-client exchanges rather than to measure statistical correlations or test causal hypotheses. As articulated by Taylor and Bogdan (2005), qualitative research generates descriptive data derived from spoken and written narratives, as well as observable social behavior. Such an approach is particularly suitable for investigating informal political practices that operate through interpersonal networks and institutional hierarchies.

Methodologically, this study prioritizes interpretive depth over quantitative generalization. In line with Creswell (2009), qualitative inquiry enables the exploration of meaning-making processes, institutional practices, and contextualized political behavior within their natural settings. Rather than reducing mobilization to measurable variables, this research examines how actors (union elites, foremen, workers, and candidate representatives) construct,

negotiate, and operationalize political alignment. Snyder (2019) underscores that qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for theory-building and conceptual refinement in complex socio-political contexts. Accordingly, this study contributes to theoretical debates on clientelism and mobilized participation through empirically grounded interpretation.

Fieldwork was conducted in Kabupaten Kudus over a four-month period from August to November 2024, encompassing the late campaign phase and immediate post-election context. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and documentation analysis. A total of 9 informants were interviewed, consisting of the Chairperson of the Federasi Serikat Pekerja Rokok, Tembakau, Makanan, dan Minuman Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (FSP RTMM-SPSI) of Kudus Regency, three plant-level union coordinators, three rank-and-file cigarette factory workers, and two representatives of the candidate pair. Observation captured interactional dynamics, organizational routines, and informal communication patterns within union and campaign settings. Interviews provided detailed accounts of negotiation processes, perceptions of electoral incentives, and experiences of mobilization. Documentary sources including public statements, organizational documents, and media reports were used for contextual verification and triangulation.

Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their strategic positions within the mobilization network. The inclusion of actors across hierarchical levels enabled the reconstruction of the brokerage chain from elite negotiation to grassroots implementation, allowing patron-client relations to be analyzed as multilayered organizational structures rather than isolated dyadic exchanges.

Data analysis was conducted inductively and iteratively. Interview transcripts and field notes were transcribed verbatim and coded manually using a three-stage coding process: open coding to identify preliminary categories (e.g., “material inducements,” “union endorsement,” “worker compliance”); axial coding to establish relationships among categories; and selective coding to integrate these categories into broader analytical themes such as “institutionalized brokerage” and “structured electoral pragmatism.” This coding process was conducted continuously during fieldwork, enabling emerging findings to inform subsequent interviews and observations.

To ensure methodological rigor, the study implemented triangulation across data sources and actor categories to strengthen credibility. Confirmability was supported through systematic documentation of field notes, interview recordings, and coding memos. Transferability was pursued by providing detailed contextual descriptions of Kudus’s industrial and electoral setting. Ethical considerations were strictly observed: all informants provided informed consent prior to participation, anonymity was guaranteed through the use of pseudonyms, and sensitive political information was handled confidentially to minimize potential risk to participants.

By situating empirical findings within established theoretical frameworks on clientelism and mobilized participation, this qualitative design enables a nuanced analysis of how labor-based electoral mobilization operates in practice. Rather than treating political behavior as an isolated individual choice, the methodology captures the embedded, relational, and hierarchical structures that shape electoral alignment in industrial communities.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Result

Cigarette factory workers constituted one of the most highly contested electoral constituencies in the 2024 Regional Head Election (Pilkada) in Kabupaten Kudus. Their strategic importance derives primarily from their demographic concentration and numerical weight, accounting for more than 12 percent of the total registered electorate (Daftar Pemilih Tetap/DPT). In subnational electoral arenas characterized by competitive patronage distribution, such a consolidated voting bloc represents a significant mobilizational asset. Consequently, competing candidate pairs for regent and deputy regent directed their efforts toward securing the support of the Federasi Serikat Pekerja Rokok, Tembakau, Makanan, dan Minuman Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (FSP RTMM-SPSI) of Kudus Regency. The federation’s institutional architecture provides a ready-made mobilization infrastructure, enabling coordinated communication from district leadership to plant-level units (PUK), sub-units, and ultimately to individual workers. This hierarchical chain transforms the union from a purely labor-representative body into a potential electoral

broker. In the framework proposed by Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016), such brokers occupy a pivotal intermediary position, translating elite resources into voter compliance while maintaining leverage over both sides.

Formally, the leadership of FSP RTMM-SPSI publicly maintains organizational neutrality, reiterating that electoral choice remains the prerogative of individual workers. This formal neutrality reflects democratic norms and legal constraints governing union activity. Simultaneously, however, the leadership signals implicit preferences toward candidates perceived as more responsive to labor demands. Internal deliberations among union elites precede any collective direction, suggesting that endorsement is not spontaneous but strategically negotiated. This dual posture formal neutrality coupled with informal signaling illustrates the subtlety of contemporary clientelistic politics, which often operates beneath the surface of procedural democratic compliance.

Both candidate pairs actively cultivated proximity to the union chairperson, anticipating that endorsement would translate into consolidated electoral support. This dynamic aligns closely with Huntington and Nelson's (1994) concept of mobilized participation, wherein political engagement is orchestrated through elite initiative rather than autonomous voter mobilization. In the Kudus case, material inducements reportedly circulated through the union's hierarchical structure before reaching rank-and-file workers. Distribution mechanisms often coordinated via foremen at their residences reflect a personalized mode of exchange. The flow of resources is neither random nor purely philanthropic; it is embedded within expectations of reciprocal political support.

As of 2023, FSP RTMM-SPSI Kudus recorded 72,168 registered members, predominantly women. Broader labor statistics indicate that the total cigarette workforce approaches 80,000 individuals, including commuters from neighboring regencies. The scale of this constituency intensifies its bargaining power within the local political marketplace. Public declarations of support staged between union leadership and rival candidate pairs underscore the symbolic capital associated with union endorsement. Such performances serve not merely as campaign rituals but as strategic signals to both workers and competing elites regarding negotiated alliances.

Sustained lobbying further reinforced this brokerage dynamic. Both Sam'ani and Mawahib reportedly maintained frequent communication with the union chairperson in efforts to secure worker mobilization. According to the chairperson's account, once an endorsement decision is reached, worker compliance is highly probable an outcome reportedly observed in prior electoral cycles, including the 2024 presidential election. This high degree of compliance indicates not coercion per se, but embedded dependency and routinized trust within hierarchical networks. Moreover, mobilization extends beyond union membership through what may be described as a "familial multiplier effect." Workers are encouraged to influence spouses, parents, and voting-age children, potentially multiplying electoral returns up to threefold.

The willingness of cigarette factory workers, positioned as clients, to advance the interests of political patrons constitutes a reciprocal obligation embedded within transactional exchange. Workers receive material benefits distributed through foremen, who themselves operate as intermediary brokers. This multilayered hierarchy reflects what Scott (1972) identifies as asymmetrical reciprocity: patrons possess superior access to economic or political resources, while clients provide loyalty and support. Kabupaten Kudus's socio-economic structure further conditions these dynamics. As an industrial region historically anchored in cigarette manufacturing, Kudus has cultivated a socially adaptive and economically pragmatic community. Long-term exposure to market-oriented relations has contributed to a political culture in which transactional exchange is normalized. In such contexts, electoral pragmatism is less an aberration than a rational adaptation to prevailing socio-economic conditions.

Hierarchically, cigarette workers occupy the lowest tier within a multilayered patronage structure. Foremen simultaneously function as patrons to workers and clients to union leadership, while union elites act as brokers between labor constituencies and candidate pairs. Importantly, clientelistic linkages are not confined to election cycles. Workers perceive concrete benefits from union affiliation, including annual cash transfers funded through the Revenue-Sharing Fund for Tobacco Excise (Dana Bagi Hasil Cukai dan Tembakau/DBHCHT), amounting to approximately IDR 1,800,000 per worker under Ministry of Finance Regulation No. 215. Access to these benefits is mediated through FSP RTMM-SPSI, reinforcing institutional dependency.

Additional welfare facilitation such as enrollment in employment and health insurance schemes further strengthens loyalty. Vulnerable family members are registered for employment insurance covering death and workplace accidents, with initial premiums subsidized through union funds. Former workers receive assistance in obtaining contribution-subsidized health insurance through collaboration between union leadership and local social services. These sustained material linkages extend the patron client relationship beyond episodic vote exchange, embedding it within everyday socio-economic security structures.

In the 2024 Pilkada, union elites ultimately leaned toward candidate pair number one, perceived as more capable of accommodating labor interests and maintaining consistent engagement with union leadership. This perceived responsiveness reinforced reciprocal expectations and translated into organizational directives encouraging workers' electoral support. The outcome illustrates not merely electoral preference, but the consolidation of patron-client alignment within local democratic competition. While such arrangements may generate short-term political stability, they simultaneously reproduce hierarchical dependency and reinforce a model of electoral politics grounded in structured exchange rather than autonomous civic deliberation.

### **Discussion**

The role of FSP RTMM-SPSI demonstrates a shift from informal brokerage to institutionalized electoral mediation. While classical clientelism, as conceptualized by Scott (1972), emphasizes dyadic patron-client exchange, the Kudus case reveals a multilayered and bureaucratized variant in which union leadership, plant-level coordinators, and foremen form a structured chain of command. This configuration aligns with Aspinall and Sukmajati's (2016) notion of brokers as intermediaries who translate elite resources into voter compliance, yet extends it by showing how formal labor hierarchies can routinize and scale brokerage practices. The union's organizational neutrality at the formal level, combined with informal endorsement signaling, illustrates how contemporary clientelism adapts to democratic procedural norms. Rather than overt coercion, influence operates through negotiated alignment and reputational authority within the hierarchy.

The circulation of material inducements through foremen further illustrates Huntington and Nelson's (1994) concept of mobilized participation. Electoral engagement among workers was not primarily driven by ideological preference but orchestrated through institutional channels. However, the high level of compliance reported by union leadership cannot be reduced to coercion. Instead, it reflects embedded dependency and asymmetrical reciprocity, consistent with Scott's (1972) formulation: workers rely on union-mediated access to welfare resources, while union elites rely on workers' electoral loyalty to maintain political leverage. The relationship is reciprocal but structurally unequal, sustained by everyday socio-economic interdependence rather than episodic vote-buying alone.

The "familial multiplier effect," whereby workers are encouraged to influence household members, further supports Aspinall and Berenschot's (2019) argument that Indonesian clientelism diffuses through kinship networks. In this sense, electoral mobilization extends beyond organizational membership and penetrates domestic spheres, amplifying the political return on brokerage investments. The effectiveness of this strategy indicates that clientelism in Kudus operates not simply at the level of individual exchange but as a socially embedded network mechanism.

Crucially, the findings refine Muhtadi's (2013) thesis on electoral pragmatism. While weak programmatic differentiation may incentivize transactional behavior, the Kudus case demonstrates that pragmatism is also structurally conditioned by institutional dependency. Workers' access to tangible benefits including transfers funded through the Revenue-Sharing Fund for Tobacco Excise (Dana Bagi Hasil Cukai dan Tembakau/DBHCHT) and facilitated enrollment in employment and health insurance schemes reinforces loyalty beyond electoral cycles. Clientelistic alignment is therefore not episodic but institutionalized within welfare intermediation structures. This supports Nastain's (2022) warning that when patronage becomes routinized within formal organizations, it risks normalizing elite dominance while preserving democratic procedural form.

The Kudus case advances theoretical debates on clientelism by illustrating how industrial labor organizations can institutionalize and normalize electoral brokerage within the framework of formal democratic competition. Instead of reflecting sporadic or individualized vote-buying practices, the findings indicate the presence of a structured system

of mobilized participation in which economic concentration, organizational hierarchy, and welfare intermediation interact to sustain durable patron-client alignments.

## CONCLUSION

Cigarette factory workers in Kabupaten Kudus, given their substantial numbers and organizational cohesion, have consistently constituted a strategic electoral target in successive local elections. The prevailing pragmatism among workers and the broader community facilitates political mobilization, particularly when reinforced by material inducements that operate as binding incentives. In the 2024 Regional Head Election, contested by two candidate pairs, both camps sought to secure unified support from this labor constituency. Electoral outreach was primarily channeled through the Federasi Serikat Pekerja Rokok, Tembakau, Makanan, dan Minuman Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (FSP RTMM-SPSI) of Kudus Regency, whose hierarchical structure enabled coordinated worker mobilization. Through this organizational network, material resources reportedly circulated to rank-and-file members, while workers were encouraged to extend electoral influence to spouses, parents, and voting-age children creating a multiplier effect that amplified the political value of union endorsement.

The magnitude and mobilizational capacity of this constituency intensified elite competition for access to union leadership. Both candidate pairs engaged in sustained lobbying and direct communication with the union chairperson, recognizing the strategic brokerage position occupied by union elites. Although public declarations of support were staged for each pair at different moments, union-led mobilization ultimately consolidated behind candidate pair number one, perceived as more responsive to labor interests and more consistent in maintaining communication with union leadership. This outcome illustrates the consolidation of patron-client alignment within local democratic competition, where responsiveness and sustained engagement reinforce reciprocal expectations.

Theoretically, these findings refine existing models of clientelism by demonstrating that patron-client exchange in decentralized democracies can be institutionalized within formal labor organizations rather than confined to informal or village-level brokerage. The Kudus case shows that industrial labor unions can function as structured electoral intermediaries, transforming individualized transactional politics into coordinated, multilayered mobilization. This expands prevailing frameworks of mobilized participation by emphasizing the role of organizational hierarchy and welfare intermediation in stabilizing clientelistic alignment beyond electoral cycles.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest the need to strengthen regulatory oversight of union-party interactions during electoral periods to prevent the instrumentalization of labor organizations for partisan mobilization. Electoral management bodies and labor authorities should enhance transparency requirements regarding political engagement by union leadership, while safeguarding workers' individual voting autonomy. In addition, expanding programmatic policy competition and improving substantive representation of labor interests may reduce reliance on transactional inducements as the primary mechanism of political alignment.

This study has limitations. First, it is based on a single-case qualitative design, which limits generalizability to other industrial regions. Second, access constraints and the sensitivity of electoral clientelism may have influenced the depth of disclosure by informants. Third, the study focuses primarily on union-mediated mobilization and does not systematically compare alternative brokerage channels outside the labor sector.

Future research could undertake comparative studies across multiple industrial districts to assess whether similar patterns of institutionalized labor brokerage emerge in different political and economic contexts. Quantitative approaches may also complement qualitative findings by measuring the electoral impact of union endorsements more precisely. Furthermore, longitudinal research could explore how sustained clientelistic alignment affects long-term democratic accountability and labor policy outcomes in post-election governance.

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