Sosioedukasi
JURNAL ILMIAH ILMU PENDIDIKAN DAN SOSIAL
ISSN: 2086-6135 E-ISSN: 2541-612x
Volume 15 No. 2. June 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

SHADOW ELECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: THE EXISTENCE AND INFLUENCE OF BOTOH

Anggi Fransiska Putri[1a*], Supratiwi[2b]

[1,2]Program Studi Magister Ilmu Politik, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Diponegoro, Jl. Prof. Soedarto, Tembalang, Kec. Tembalang, Kota Semarang, Jawa Tengah 50139

[a]*E-mail: anggifransiska@students.undip.ac.id*
[b]*E-mail: supratiwisudarto@gmail.com*

(*) Corresponding Author
anggifransiska@students.undip.ac.id

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received : 20-04-2026
Revised : 07-05-2026
Accepted : 11-06-2026

KEYWORDS
Botoh, Clientelism; Indonesian Elections; Informal Institutions; Shadow Electoral Infrastructure;

ABSTRACT
Indonesian elections are formally democratic yet empirically shaped by informal practices. Among the most persistent undertheorized actors is the *botoh*. Existing literature treats botoh as transactional vote buyers within clientelism frameworks. This article argues that botoh constitute a *shadow electoral infrastructure* a durable, patterned informal institutional arrangement that systematically organizes electoral competition. Employing a qualitative synthesis of empirical case studies from multiple Indonesian local elections (Tulungagung, Lamongan, Blitar, Kudus, Banjarnegara, Pamekasan, Rembang, and Central Kalimantan), the analysis reveals that botoh perform three core functions mass mobilization, vote-buying coordination, and propaganda activism through hierarchical, socially embedded networks spanning the entire electoral cycle. Three systemic patterns emerge: standardization of practices across regions, recurrence across election cycles, and candidate dependence on botoh as essential infrastructure. Drawing on informal institutions theory, brokerage, and embeddedness, the concept of shadow electoral infrastructure shifts analysis from actor-level explanations of vote buying to system-level understanding of how elections are organized under weak formal institutionalization. Botoh are not pathologies of democracy but constitutive features of how Indonesian elections actually work.
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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's transition to democracy in 1998 ushered in an era of competitive elections and far-reaching decentralization, fundamentally reshaping the political landscape of the world's third-largest democracy (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). More than two decades after Reformasi, Indonesian elections are formally democratic, characterized by regular multiparty contests, direct local elections (pilkada), and significant turnover in political office (Mietzner, 2013). Yet beneath this formal democratic veneer, electoral processes remain empirically shaped by informal practices, clientelistic networks, and extra-institutional actors who mediate access to voters, resources, and political power (Hadiz, 2010; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). Decentralization, rather than diminishing these informal dynamics, has paradoxically amplified them by creating thousands of new electoral arenas where local power brokers exercise disproportionate influence (Buehler, 2016; Tomsa, 2020).

Among the most enduring yet undertheorized actors in Indonesian electoral politics is the botoh a figure deeply embedded in local political ecologies, particularly in Java. Existing studies have predominantly approached botoh through the lens of vote buying, money politics, or transactional clientelism, treating them as ephemeral conduits for distributing cash or goods in exchange for electoral support (Choi, 2009; Aspinall, 2014; Muhtadi, 2019). This framing, while not incorrect, is incomplete. Botoh are not merely seasonal vote brokers who materialize during campaign periods and dissolve afterward. Rather, they are persistent, organized actors whose presence predates electoral democracy and whose influence extends across electoral cycles, connecting candidates to communities through dense networks of social obligation, economic dependency, and reciprocal exchange (Sidel, 2008; Warburton, 2016).

The broader literature on clientelism and brokerage in comparative politics has illuminated much about how informal actors facilitate vote exchange in weakly institutionalized party systems (Stokes, 2005; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2009; Hicken, 2011). In the Indonesian context, scholars have documented the proliferation of "vote brokers" (calo) and "witnesses" (saksi) who operate at the neighborhood level, distributing campaign materials, monitoring voter behavior, and ensuring turnout (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Muhtadi, 2019). Similarly, studies of money politics have meticulously catalogued the prevalence of vote buying, the mechanisms of distribution, and the effectiveness of such transactions (Simandjuntak, 2012; Mietzner, 2013; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). Yet within this rich body of research, botoh occupy an ambiguous position. Some studies mention them as particularly influential types of brokers in Javanese contexts, while others subsume them under generic categories of "local strongmen" or "informal leaders" (Schulte Nordholt, 2014; van Klinken, 2014). What remains consistently missing is a systematic treatment of botoh as actors who do more than facilitate transactions actors who actively structure electoral competition itself. This gap is consequential. By focusing on botoh as deviant, corrupt, or merely transactional figures, existing scholarship implicitly reproduces a normative distinction between "clean" formal politics and "dirty" informal practices (Aspinall & van Klinken, 2011). Such framing obscures the possibility that botoh might represent not a pathology of Indonesian democracy but a constitutive feature of how electoral competition is organized on the ground.

This article advances a distinct argument: botoh should be understood as part of an informal institutional arrangement that systematically organizes electoral processes in contemporary Indonesia. Rather than viewing botoh as exogenous disruptors of formal democratic procedures, this article argue that they constitute a shadow electoral infrastructure, a durable, patterned, and widely recognized set of practices and relationships that reduces uncertainty for candidates, facilitates coordination across fragmented political networks, and provides predictable mechanisms for voter mobilization and reward distribution. This infrastructure is "shadow" not because it is entirely secret (although elements are deliberately concealed) but because it operates parallel to formal electoral institutions, filling gaps that formal rules and organizations cannot adequately address (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). It is "infrastructure" because it provides an underlying framework that shapes how electoral competition actually occurs, much as physical infrastructure shapes mobility and communication. This formulation serves as an analytical lens rather than a fully specified theory. It directs attention to systematic properties, patterned interactions, and the structuring effects of botoh activity, without claiming that botoh operate identically across all Indonesian contexts or that no variation exists.

Accordingly, this study poses the following research question: How do botoh operate within Indonesian electoral politics, and in what ways does their presence shape the systemic logic of electoral competition? Answering this question requires moving beyond actor-level descriptions of what botoh do toward an analysis of how their activities produce predictable patterns, stabilize expectations, and constitute an informal institutional order that candidates, voters, and party operatives treat as given.

To ground this analysis theoretically, the article draw upon three complementary frameworks. First, Helmke and Levitsky's (2004, 2006) theory of informal institutions provides the conceptual vocabulary for treating botoh practices as patterned, socially shared rules that structure political behavior, even in the absence of formal enforcement. Informal institutions emerge, according to this framework, where formal institutions leave gaps, create perverse incentives, or prove incapable of coordinating behavior (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lauth, 2000). The persistence of botoh reflects such institutional complementarity: they persist not despite formal electoral rules but because those rules, in practice, generate demand for informal coordination mechanisms. Second, Stokes's (2005) work on brokerage and contingent clientelism illuminates the functional role that intermediaries like botoh play in

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resolving the "commitment problem" inherent in vote buying the difficulty of ensuring that voters reciprocate after receiving payment. Brokers reduce monitoring costs, enforce compliance through social networks, and manage the distribution of selective incentives (Stokes, 2005; Nichter, 2008; Stokes et al., 2013). Third, Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness reminds us that botoh do not operate in a transactional vacuum; their effectiveness derives from their deep embeddedness in pre-existing social relations, local hierarchies, and community obligations. Economic and political exchange, Granovetter argued, is always embedded in ongoing social structures that shape trust, information flow, and sanctioning capacity (Granovetter, 1985; Krippner, 2001). Botoh draw power not from wealth or coercion alone but from their location within dense social networks that precede and outlast any particular election.

The contribution of this article is twofold. Theoretically, this shift the analytical center of gravity from actor-level explanations of vote buying or broker behavior toward a system-level understanding of how informal institutions organize electoral competition. This reframing moves beyond the normative preoccupation with whether botoh are "good" or "bad" for democracy, asking instead how their patterned activities constitute a shadow infrastructure that candidates and voters alike must navigate. Empirically, this article provide a systematic account of botoh practices across electoral stages before, during, and after elections demonstrating their recurrent, structured, and predictable nature. In doing so, author challenge the prevailing tendency to treat botoh as exceptional, deviant, or merely transactional, revealing instead their role as constitutive elements of how electoral competition actually works in contemporary Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research question concerns not the measurement of variables but the understanding of processes, structures, and systemic patterns. The phenomenon under investigation the role of botoh in structuring electoral competition involves hidden, socially embedded practices that are not easily captured through quantitative methods (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Muhtadi, 2019).

The case selection for this study focuses on Indonesian local elections where botoh have been empirically documented. Drawing on existing case studies, the analysis includes elections in Tulungagung (2018), Lamongan (2020), Blitar (2020), Kudus (2018), Banjarnegara (2019), Manduing Taheta in Central Kalimantan (2021), Wates in Kediri (2024), Sotabar Village in Pamekasan (2022), Rembang (2019), and multiple villages in Central Kalimantan (Pioh et al., 2024). These cases were selected because they span different levels of electoral contestation village, district, and regency and cover multiple regions across Java and Kalimantan. This variation allows for the identification of patterns that hold across contexts while remaining attentive to local specificities (Buehler, 2016; Tomsa, 2020).

The data sources for this study are entirely secondary by synthesizing findings from peer-reviewed journal articles and empirical reports that document botoh practices through rigorous qualitative fieldwork. The selected studies employ multiple data collection methods: in-depth interviews with botoh, candidates, campaign teams, village heads, religious figures, and ordinary voters; direct or participant observation of campaign activities and community gatherings; analysis of documentary materials including election commission records, campaign documents, and media reports; and focus group discussions with voters and community figures. The triangulation across methods within each individual study strengthens the credibility of the empirical claims (Flick, 2018). This study further triangulates across multiple studies, comparing findings from different regions, researchers, and election cycles to identify consistent patterns and account for variation.

The analytical strategy proceeded in three stages. First, empirical descriptions of botoh activities, organizational forms, and relationships from each source are extracted and coded them inductively for recurrent themes. This inductive coding identified core functions (mobilization, vote-buying coordination, propaganda activism), organizational structures (vertical hierarchy, horizontal coordination, social embeddedness), and temporal patterns (before, during, and after elections). Second, this article applied theoretical concepts to interpret the coded patterns. Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) theory of informal institutions was used to assess whether botoh practices constitute socially shared rules enforced outside official channels. The brokerage literature (Stokes, 2005; Stokes et

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al., 2013) was used to identify functional roles that botoh perform within clientelist chains. Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness was used to explain why botoh networks persist through social relationships rather than merely material exchange. Third, synthesized the coded patterns and theoretical interpretations into the concept of shadow electoral infrastructure. This concept was developed iteratively by comparing the properties of botoh networks durability, standardization, candidate dependence to properties of infrastructures identified in the organizational and political literature (Star & Ruhleder, 1996; Bowker et al., 2010).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

This section presents empirical findings on the practices, organization, and systemic patterns of botoh in Indonesian local elections. The results are organized thematically, moving from the concrete activities botoh perform, to the organizational structures within which they operate, to their involvement across the electoral cycle, and finally to the systemic patterns that emerge across cases. The section remains primarily descriptive, reserving theoretical reinterpretation for the discussion that follows.

The Core Activities of Botoh

Across the case studies examined, botoh perform three core functions that extend well beyond the narrow act of vote buying. These functions mass mobilization, vote-buying coordination, and propaganda activism recur with sufficient frequency across regions and election cycles to constitute a discernible pattern.

The first core function is mass mobilization. Botoh organize voters through hierarchical networks that extend from district or regency levels down to the neighborhood (Rukun Tetangga) level. In the 2018 Tulungagung regency election, senior botoh recruited lower-level botoh referred to as "jokers," each of whom was responsible for mobilizing approximately ten voters through personal networks, family ties, and informal community groups including traditional artists, kejawen clusters, and coffee shop communities (Abiyyu, 2020). In the 2020 Lamongan regency election, botoh were integrated into pyramid-like networks extending from regency coordinators to district coordinators, village coordinators, and neighborhood-level operatives, with each level assigned specific mobilization targets (Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022). In the 2018 Kudus election, botoh networks operated through a structure beginning with a major broker at the district level, followed by subdistrict coordinators and village-level botoh who collected electoral information and monitored voter preferences (Hartati et al., 2019). In the 2019 village head election in Parakan Village, Banjarnegara, botoh functioned both individually and collectively within organized campaign teams, acting as intermediaries between candidates and voters through local cultural practices such as ngendong (door-to-door visits) and jagongan (informal social gatherings) (Widyanti & Fudin, 2022). In the Wates village election in Kediri, botoh were found to operate as multifaceted political actors who simultaneously acted as brokers, vote buyers, and financial backers, actively mobilizing voters and shaping campaign strategies through organized voter targeting and coalition-building among botoh themselves (Novitasari et al., 2024). In Central Kalimantan, the Bakas Lewu respected Dayak Ngaju elders mobilized voters through interpersonal communication, family networks, community gatherings, and cultural narratives emphasizing collective identity and social harmony, demonstrating that mobilization need not rely solely on monetary incentives (Haridison, 2025). These findings indicate that botoh mobilization is not ad hoc but systematically organized through multi-level chains of command, though the mechanisms vary from material distribution to cultural authority.

The second core function is vote-buying coordination. Far from being simple distributors of cash, botoh conduct systematic voter mapping and differentiated resource distribution based on detailed local intelligence. In Tulungagung, botoh employed a color-coded system: petak (white mark) for supporters of the candidate, cemeng (black mark) for opponents, and klawu (grey) for undecided voters. They then deployed a strategy called ngebomb ("bombing"), distributing differentiated payments (25,000 to 35,000 Indonesian rupiah for supporters, 10,000 to 15,000 for opponents, and 45,000 to 60,000 for undecided voters) based on loyalty and geographic location (Abiyyu, 2020). In addition to cash payments, botoh employed non-monetary tactics including buying voters' invitation letters to prevent them from voting for opponents, distributing electronic goods such as televisions and gadgets, and organizing trips or karaoke parties on election day to distract opposition supporters (Abiyyu, 2020). In the 2018 Kudus election, botoh conducted informal surveys through everyday social interactions in coffee stalls, community

gatherings, and other local spaces, using the information gathered to identify opposition strongholds, determine targets for cash distribution, and design more effective vote-buying strategies (Hartati et al., 2019). In the 2020 Lamongan election, botoh employed vote buying through direct cash payments, food packages, assistance programs, serangan fajar (dawn attacks), manipulation of voter data, and competitive bidding for electoral support by offering higher payments than rival candidates (Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022). In the 2019 village head election in Parakan Village, botoh distributed money to voters but also relied on culturally embedded practices such as ngendong (door-to-door persuasion) and ngaton (public demonstrations of loyalty and visibility on election day) to build trust and strengthen voter commitment (Widyanti & Fudin, 2022). In the Wates village election, botoh engaged in systematic distribution of money or goods to influence electoral behavior, operating within hierarchical networks where wealthier "big botoh" dominated financing and coordination while smaller actors assisted in mobilization (Novitasari et al., 2024). In the 2018 Blitar regency election, botoh conducted voter mapping, monitored public sentiment, distributed money to voters, disseminated political narratives, and mobilized grassroots support through extensive local networks, contributing to the defeat of the incumbent PDIP-backed candidate (Widyarini, 2022). The accuracy of these botoh surveys was noted to be high precisely because they relied on long-standing local social networks and close community relationships rather than formal polling mechanisms.

The third core function is propaganda activism. Botoh and allied actors, particularly village heads, actively construct and disseminate narratives that shape voter perceptions and generate sympathy for preferred candidates. The most striking example comes from the 2018 Tulungagung election, where the incumbent candidate Syahri Mulyo was arrested by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) on corruption charges involving 2.5 billion rupiah in bribes just 21 days before election day, rendering him unable to campaign (Abiyyu, 2020). In response, botoh-affiliated village heads disseminated three strategic narratives. First, they claimed that the arrest was a "political scenario" orchestrated by the opponent Margiono, who was portrayed as a Jakarta-based national figure using his network to frame Mulyo. Second, they warned that all village empowerment programs would be revoked if Margiono won, creating a material stake for villagers. Third, they spread the promise that if Mulyo won the election and was inaugurated, he would be freed from all charges and return to Tulungagung, effectively transforming the election into a campaign for his liberation. This rebranding of Mulyo as a banteng ketaton ("injured bull") a wounded but resilient fighter deserving sympathy successfully generated voter support despite his legal incapacity and damaged reputation (Abiyyu, 2020). In the Manduing Taheta village election in Central Kalimantan, the Bakas Lewu employed cultural and social strategies including direct interpersonal communication, informal persuasion through kinship networks, traditional "surveys" conducted via trusted community informants, narrative construction, and issue dissemination. Rather than using formal polling mechanisms, they relied on community intelligence gathered through social relationships to map voter preferences and monitor political dynamics, building persuasive narratives emphasizing the candidate's reputation, leadership qualities, commitment to Dayak values, and ability to represent community interests (Haridison, 2025). In Sotabar Village, Pamekasan, botoh acted as political recruiters and gatekeepers who shaped candidate selection and voter preferences, effectively positioning themselves as informal centers of power within village politics, with villagers trusting botoh because of their long-standing involvement in local political affairs and their perceived ability to identify candidates who could deliver benefits to the community (Akbar & Aribowo, 2022). These cases demonstrate that botoh influence operates through symbolic and discursive mechanisms, not solely through material exchange.

Organizational Structures of Botoh Networks

Empirical studies consistently reveal that botoh operate through organized, hierarchical networks rather than as isolated individuals or temporary coalitions. These networks exhibit three defining characteristics: vertical hierarchy, horizontal coordination, and embeddedness in long-term social relationships.

The vertical hierarchy of botoh networks is well-documented across multiple cases. In the 2018 Tulungagung election, two parallel botoh networks operated simultaneously. The first network centered on Dasar, a senior botoh and the candidate's father, with a pyramid structure reaching from the district level down to the neighborhood level. The second network centered on Suharminto, the brother of the local PDI-P head Supriyono, which operated through a similar hierarchical arrangement (Abiyyu, 2020). In the 2018 Kudus election, the botoh network began with a major

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Volume 15 No. 2. June 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

broker at the district level, followed by coordinators at the subdistrict level and village-level botoh who collected electoral information and monitored voter preferences (Hartati et al., 2019). In Sotabar Village, Pamekasan, botoh relied on intermediary actors known as blater village strongmen, religious figures, and respected elders who translated political strategies into grassroots mobilization. Within this structure, botoh occupied the highest position as strategists and financiers, while blater functioned as field operatives (Akbar & Aribowo, 2022). In the 2020 Lamongan election, campaign organizations integrated botoh into structures that even utilized dedicated software applications for transmitting voter data, indicating that botoh activities have become increasingly professionalized and technologically supported (Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022). In the Wates village election, the hierarchical structure was explicitly stratified, with wealthier "big botoh" dominating financing and coordination while smaller actors assisted in mobilization (Novitasari et al., 2024). In the 2018 Blitar election, the study distinguished between ordinary botoh who merely participate in gambling activities and powerful botoh who possess extensive networks of subordinates and the capacity to influence electoral outcomes, with influential botoh often maintaining business interests in construction and resource-based enterprises that provided financial resources and loyal followers (Widyarini, 2022).

The horizontal coordination of botoh networks is equally important. Multiple studies document that botoh do not operate in competition with one another but rather coordinate through formal and informal agreements. In Tulungagung, the two parallel botoh networks (Dasar's and Suharminto's) coordinated their activities through the candidate's campaign manager rather than working at cross-purposes (Abiyyu, 2020). In Parakan Village, Banjarnegara, botoh functioned both individually and collectively within organized campaign teams, acting as intermediaries between village head candidates and voters (Widyanti & Fudin, 2022). In the Wates village election in Kediri, botoh engaged in coalition-building among themselves, with wealthier "big botoh" dominating financing and coordination while smaller actors assisted in mobilization, indicating a stratified and organized structure rather than fragmented individual actions (Novitasari et al., 2024). In the 2018 Kudus election, the study documented cases where botoh worked for one candidate while simultaneously acting as informants for a rival candidate in order to profit from both sides, demonstrating that horizontal coordination can also include strategic duplicity (Hartati et al., 2019).

The third and most theoretically significant characteristic is the embeddedness of botoh networks in long-term social relationships of kinship, trust, and reciprocity. This finding challenges purely transactional models of clientelism that assume brokers are motivated solely by immediate material gain. In Tulungagung, village heads supported Mulyo not primarily because of direct cash payments but because they felt indebted to him for past assistance in their own village head election victories, creating a sense of reciprocal obligation that did not require direct monetary payment (Abiyyu, 2020). Similarly, lower-level botoh remained loyal to senior figures because those senior figures provided assistance and access whether through loans, business opportunities, or protection creating feelings of hesitancy and embarrassment that prevented betrayal even when the candidate's situation seemed hopeless (Abiyyu, 2020). In Blitar 2020, powerful botoh often maintained business interests beyond elections, including construction and resource-based enterprises, which provided them with financial resources and loyal followers, sustaining their political influence across election cycles (Widyarini, 2022). In Manduing Taheta, Central Kalimantan, the Bakas Lewu (respected Dayak Ngaju elders) derived their brokerage influence from cultural legitimacy, kinship ties, personal credibility, and moral authority rather than primarily from monetary incentives (Haridison, 2025). Their endorsements carried significant weight because villagers perceived them as trusted community representatives whose recommendations were based on communal interests rather than purely political calculations. In the 2018 Blitar election, the relationship between candidates and botoh was highly transactional and reflected contemporary patron-client relations based primarily on mutual benefit rather than ideological affinity or long-term loyalty, with botoh accepting support requests from candidates offering greater material incentives (Widyarini, 2022). In the 2018 Kudus election, the relationship between candidates and botoh was described as highly pragmatic and transactional, with candidates approaching botoh long before election day because of their network capacity, while botoh chose candidates who offered the greatest financial rewards, with their primary motivation being economic gain rather than political loyalty or ideological commitment (Hartati et al., 2019). These findings indicate that while material calculation matters, botoh influence is sustained through a complex mixture of transactional exchange and durable social relationships.

Botoh Across the Electoral Cycle

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Volume 15 No. 2. June 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

Botoh involvement is not confined to election day or the immediate campaign period. Empirical evidence demonstrates that botoh operate across all three stages of electoral competition: before elections (candidate selection and preparation), during elections (mobilization and monitoring), and after elections (reward distribution and post-election influence).

Before elections, botoh act as political recruiters and gatekeepers who shape which individuals become viable candidates in the first place. In Sotabar Village, Pamekasan, botoh actively searched for potential candidates months before the official election period, conducted political surveys evaluating candidates' popularity and social standing, and assessed their chances of winning. Candidates were selected not only on the basis of electability but also on their reputation within the village, social connections, and perceived ability to gain public trust (Akbar & Aribowo, 2022). In Tulungagung, candidate Syahri Mulyo himself was the son of a senior botoh and had won the 2013 election primarily through his father's botoh network, not through party support (Abiyyu, 2020). Similarly, Supriyono (head of PDI-P Tulungagung and speaker of the local parliament) and his brother Suharminto owed their political positions to botoh networks (Abiyyu, 2020). In the 2018 Kudus election, botoh conducted regular electability surveys months before the election and used this information to identify potential candidates to support (Hartati et al., 2019). In Rembang, the brondot strategy family-based electoral mobilization closed the space for genuine competitors because the incumbent's extended family network was large, financially capable, and highly solidary, intimidating potential candidates from other clans or families from running, with over 90 percent of village government employees affiliated with the incumbent's family (Nafisah, 2023). In the Wates village election, candidates were shown to depend heavily on botoh for campaign financing due to the high cost of elections, creating reciprocal patron-client relationships that began before the campaign officially started (Novitasari et al., 2024). These findings indicate that botoh exercise influence over candidate recruitment, effectively determining who is permitted to compete.

During elections, botoh coordinate the full range of mobilization, distribution, and monitoring activities described above. However, one particularly sophisticated mechanism deserves separate attention: the use of gambling as an electoral strategy. In Tulungagung, botoh employed three distinct gambling systems. The first, ngapit (or apit), meaning "clamping" or "sandwiching," was used by senior botoh Dasar, who placed a large public bet on the opposing candidate Margiono with the promise to pay double the bet amount if Margiono won. Simultaneously, Dasar placed an even larger secret bet on his own son Mulyo with botoh networks outside Tulungagung. The effect of the public bet on Margiono was to attract other gamblers and villagers to also place bets on Margiono many of whom then supported and worked hard for Mulyo, because if Mulyo won, Dasar would pay all Margiono bettors double their money, but if Margiono won, Dasar would lose his larger secret bet. This created a powerful incentive for ordinary villagers to vote for Mulyo and actively campaign for him, since their own gambling winnings depended on his victory (Abiyyu, 2020). The second system, leg-leg'an, involved simple gambling by guessing which candidate would win or lose. The third, biting, involved betting that calculated the exact percentage or number of votes a candidate would receive, requiring more sophisticated voter mapping and mobilization (Abiyyu, 2020). This gambling mechanism transformed voters from passive recipients of cash into active agents of electoral mobilization whose financial self-interest aligned with the botoh's preferred candidate. In the Wates village election, botoh activities were driven by gambling practices such as betting on election outcomes and vote margins, with these economic motivations translating into structured political interventions including organized voter targeting, coalition-building among botoh, and systematic distribution of money or goods (Novitasari et al., 2024). In Lamongan, the study distinguished between pure botoh whose activities remained focused on gambling and betting among fellow botoh regarding electoral outcomes, and political botoh who entered the political arena by joining campaign organizations and functioning as political brokers (Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022).

After elections, botoh expect reciprocal returns and maintain the capacity to challenge elected officials who fail to fulfill agreements. In Sotabar Village, Pamekasan, a political alliance between the influential botoh Abah Kagik and the incumbent village head Abdul Aziz eventually deteriorated because the incumbent failed to fulfill political agreements and promises made during the election campaign. As a result, the botoh withdrew support, mobilized opposition networks, and began searching for a new candidate capable of defeating the incumbent in the subsequent election (Akbar & Aribowo, 2022). In the Wates village election in Kediri, candidates were shown to depend heavily on botoh for campaign financing due to the high cost of elections, which created reciprocal patron-client relationships

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in which botoh expected political or economic returns after the election, such as access to village resources (Novitasari et al., 2024). In Lamongan, botoh who had supported winning candidates expected continued access to political decision-making and village development projects (Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022). In Rembang, the brondot strategy perpetuated intergenerational power transfers, with power rotating among family members across election cycles, keeping the village head position within the same biological family across multiple generations for example, in Sampung Village, Slamet Riyadi had served two terms, his wife Siti Kunjaimi was the incumbent for the 2019 election but was instructed by the family success team to lose to her husband, who was running for his third and final term, with the wife retaining the possibility of running again for two future terms after her husband retired (Nafisah, 2023). In Tulungagung, the victory of Muhammad Tamzil in the 2018 Kudus election was attributed to botoh successfully using information about opposition support bases to direct cash distribution more effectively into strategic areas, with a candidate initially considered less electable ultimately defeating the candidate expected to win (Hartati et al., 2019). These findings demonstrate that botoh are not merely election-time brokers but actors who expect sustained influence over governance and who possess the capacity to punish non-compliant officials by mobilizing opposition in subsequent elections.

Systemic Patterns: Standardization, Recurrence, and Dependence

Across regions, election cycles, and levels of contestation village, district, and regency three systemic patterns emerge that distinguish botoh from ad hoc or temporary political actors. The first pattern is standardization of practices. Botoh across different regions employ remarkably similar strategies, suggesting the existence of shared knowledge, transmitted norms, and institutionalized practices rather than locally improvised tactics. These standardized practices include: ngendong (door-to-door visits and personal persuasion); jagongan (informal social gatherings used to gather information and assess voter preferences); getok tular (word-of-mouth communication for transmitting political messages); voter mapping using color-coded systems; differentiated cash payments based on loyalty status; non-monetary tactics including buying invitation letters and organizing distracting activities on election day; the use of gambling mechanisms (ngapit, leg-leg'an, biting); the construction of propaganda narratives such as the "injured bull" framing; serangan fajar (dawn attacks); competitive bidding for electoral support; and the use of dedicated software applications for transmitting voter data (Abiyyu, 2020; Hartati et al., 2019; Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022; Widyanti & Fudin, 2022). In Parakan Village, botoh employed ngendong, jagongan, and ngaton as locally embedded strategies that built trust and strengthened voter commitment through familiar social interactions (Widyanti & Fudin, 2022). In Manduing Taheta, the Bakas Lewu employed direct interpersonal communication, informal persuasion through kinship networks, traditional "surveys" via trusted community informants, narrative construction, and issue dissemination demonstrating that even culturally distinct forms of brokerage follow predictable, repeatable patterns (Haridison, 2025). The recurrence of these specific strategies across East Java (Tulungagung, Lamongan, Blitar, Kudus, Kediri, Pamekasan), Central Java (Banjarnegara, Rembang), and Central Kalimantan indicates that botoh operate with a shared tactical repertoire that transcends regional and cultural boundaries.

The second pattern is recurrence across election cycles. Botoh networks are not created anew for each election but persist through intergenerational continuity and institutional memory. In Tulungagung, Mulyo inherited his father Dasar's botoh network, which had been operational for decades (Abiyyu, 2020). In Lamongan, botoh who operated in the 2018 election were reactivated for the 2020 contest, with campaign organizations even utilizing dedicated applications for transmitting voter data, indicating that botoh databases and organizational structures are maintained across election cycles (Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022). In Rembang, the brondot strategy family-based electoral mobilization perpetuated intergenerational power transfers, with power rotating among family members across election cycles, keeping the village head position within the same biological family across multiple generations (Nafisah, 2023). In the Wates village election in Kediri, botoh were shown to operate as multifaceted political actors across successive elections, simultaneously acting as brokers, vote buyers, and financial backers in repeatable patterns (Novitasari et al., 2024). In Sotabar Village, the conflict between botoh Abah Kagik and incumbent Abdul Aziz led to the botoh searching for a new candidate for the subsequent election, demonstrating that botoh networks persist even when specific patron-client relationships break down (Akbar & Aribowo, 2022). In Blitar, powerful botoh maintained business interests in construction and resource-based enterprises that provided them with financial resources and loyal followers, sustaining their political influence across election cycles regardless of which candidate won (Widyarini,

2022). This recurrence across cycles demonstrates that botoh are not temporary phenomena but durable institutional actors.

The third and most analytically significant pattern is candidate dependence on botoh. Multiple studies show that candidates depend on botoh not as optional tools but as essential infrastructure without which effective electoral competition may be impossible. In Tulungagung, candidate Mulyo explicitly chose to rely on botoh rather than political consultants or party cadres because botoh had proven their effectiveness in the 2013 election and because party cadres were perceived as lacking deep understanding of local voter characteristics and potentially embezzling campaign funds (Abiyyu, 2020). In Blitar 2020, candidates increasingly relied on botoh because formal party organizations were perceived as less effective in reaching local communities and understanding electoral dynamics at the grassroots level (Widyarini, 2022). In the Wates village election in Kediri, candidates were shown to depend heavily on botoh for campaign financing due to the high cost of elections, creating reciprocal patron-client relationships in which botoh gained leverage over candidates (Novitasari et al., 2024). In Sotabar Village, the incumbent village head's dependence on a powerful botoh for his initial election created ongoing obligations that, when violated, led to the botoh mobilizing opposition against him (Akbar & Aribowo, 2022). In Lamongan, candidates actively sought out experienced botoh because they possessed local knowledge, extensive networks, and proven methods for influencing voter behavior, recognizing that formal party structures alone were insufficient (Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022). In the 2018 Kudus election, the candidate Muhammad Tamzil, who was initially considered less electable, was able to defeat the candidate expected to win precisely because of botoh networks that conducted local surveys, gathered intelligence, and executed aggressive vote-buying operations (Hartati et al., 2019). This pattern of dependence indicates that botoh possess structural power within the electoral system: candidates cannot easily bypass them, and those who attempt to do so risk electoral defeat or post-election conflict.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings presented above reveal that botoh are not merely transactional vote brokers or ephemeral actors in Indonesian electoral politics. Rather, they constitute a durable, patterned, and systematic presence that organizes electoral competition from before candidates are selected to after winners are inaugurated. This discussion interprets these findings through the three theoretical frameworks introduced earlier informal institutions (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004), brokerage (Stokes, 2005; Stokes et al., 2013), and embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) and advances the concept of shadow electoral infrastructure as an analytical lens for understanding how botoh structure electoral processes.

The most striking finding is that botoh practices exhibit the core properties of informal institutions as defined by Helmke and Levitsky (2004). Informal institutions are socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels. Botoh meet this definition on multiple counts. The standardized practices documented across regions ngendong, jagongan, color-coded voter mapping, differentiated cash payments, gambling mechanisms such as ngapit constitute a shared tactical repertoire that botoh across East Java, Central Java, and Central Kalimantan recognize and deploy. These practices are not invented anew for each election but transmitted through networks and reproduced across cycles. Moreover, they are enforced through informal mechanisms: botoh who defect or fail to deliver lose access to future candidates, while candidates who betray botoh agreements face mobilization of opposition in subsequent elections, as seen in Sotabar Village where botoh Abah Kagik withdrew support and searched for a new candidate after the incumbent failed to fulfill promises (Akbar & Aribowo, 2022). This informal enforcement operates outside formal electoral laws and institutions, yet it shapes behavior as powerfully as any formal rule. Helmke and Levitsky (2004) argue that informal institutions emerge where formal institutions create gaps or perverse incentives. In the Indonesian case, formal electoral rules secret ballots, anti-corruption laws, campaign finance regulations are systematically circumvented because they fail to address the practical problems candidates face: how to reach voters in fragmented local contexts, how to monitor compliance, how to reduce uncertainty. Botoh fill these gaps.

This brings us to the second theoretical framework: brokerage and the commitment problem. Stokes (2005; Stokes et al., 2013) has shown that vote buying is plagued by a fundamental commitment problem: candidates cannot be sure that voters will reciprocate after receiving payment, and voters cannot be sure that candidates will deliver

promised benefits after the election. Brokers emerge as a solution to this problem because they can monitor voter behavior, enforce compliance through social sanctions, and distribute rewards conditionally. The botoh documented in this study perform exactly these functions. Their voter mapping systems the color-coded petak, cemeng, klawu in Tulungagung (Abiyyu, 2020) represent sophisticated monitoring mechanisms that reduce information asymmetries. Their hierarchical networks, from district coordinators down to neighborhood operatives, enable surveillance of voter behavior on election day. Their post-election reward distribution and their capacity to punish non-compliant officials, as seen in Sotabar and Wates (Akbar & Aribowo, 2022; Governance Journal, 2024), address the candidate's commitment problem from the voter's perspective. However, the Indonesian case reveals something the standard brokerage literature underemphasizes: brokers themselves can become structurally indispensable. Candidates in Tulungagung, Blitar, Lamongan, and Kudus did not simply use botoh as convenient tools; they depended on them, sometimes abandoning formal party structures entirely (Abiyyu, 2020; Widyarini, 2022; Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022; Hartati et al., 2019). This dependence shifts the power balance in ways the literature on contingent clientelism (Stokes, 2005) does not fully capture. When candidates cannot win without botoh, botoh gain structural power over the electoral process itself not just over vote transactions. This explains why candidates in Tulungagung chose botoh over political consultants, and why candidates in Lamongan actively sought out experienced botoh despite the costs (Susilowati & Fitrianto, 2022).

The third theoretical framework Granovetter's (1985) concept of embeddedness explains why botoh persist across cycles and why candidates cannot easily replace them with formal party structures. Granovetter argued that economic and political exchange is always embedded in ongoing social relations of trust, reciprocity, and obligation. Pure transactional models of clientelism, which treat vote buying as a simple exchange of cash for votes, fail because they ignore the social contexts that make such exchanges possible and enforceable. The botoh phenomenon illustrates embeddedness with exceptional clarity. Village heads in Tulungagung supported candidate Mulyo not because of direct cash payments but because they felt indebted to him for past assistance in their own election victories (Abiyyu, 2020). Lower-level botoh remained loyal to senior figures because of loans, business opportunities, and protection relationships that created feelings of isin (embarrassment) that prevented betrayal even when the candidate's situation seemed hopeless. The Bakas Lewu in Central Kalimantan derived their influence from cultural legitimacy, kinship ties, and moral authority, not primarily from monetary incentives (Haridison, 2025). These are not transactional relationships in any narrow sense; they are social relationships within which transactions are embedded. This embeddedness has a crucial implication for electoral competition: botoh networks cannot be easily replicated or replaced. A candidate cannot simply hire new brokers with sufficient cash because trust, reciprocity, and local knowledge take years to accumulate. The candidate's dependence on botoh is therefore not merely a strategic choice but a structural condition created by the social embeddedness of electoral politics.

Taken together, these theoretical interpretations support the article's central argument: botoh constitute a shadow electoral infrastructure that organizes electoral competition in contemporary Indonesia. The term "infrastructure" is deliberately chosen. In organizational theory, infrastructures are underlying systems that enable other activities to occur (Star & Ruhleder, 1996; Bowker et al., 2010). Infrastructures are typically invisible when working properly, become visible upon breakdown, and are taken for granted by the actors who depend on them. Botoh networks exhibit all these properties. Candidates take botoh networks for granted as the means by which voters are reached and mobilized. When botoh networks fail as when a botoh withdraws support or defects to an opponent the breakdown becomes immediately visible in electoral outcomes. Botoh networks are "shadow" not because they are entirely clandestine (many botoh activities are openly discussed in villages and coffee shops) but because they operate parallel to and in the interstices of formal electoral institutions. They are not recognized in election laws, yet they shape who runs, who wins, and how governance is allocated afterward. The shadow electoral infrastructure, in other words, is the real organizational substrate of Indonesian local elections, while formal party structures and electoral management bodies are often the visible superstructure.

This reframing has several analytical advantages over existing approaches. First, it moves beyond the normative dichotomy of "clean" formal politics versus "dirty" informal practices that has implicitly structured much of the literature (Aspinall & van Klinken, 2011). From the perspective of shadow infrastructure, botoh are not deviations from or pathologies of democracy; they are constitutive features of how electoral competition actually

Sosioedukasi
JURNAL ILMIAH ILMU PENDIDIKAN DAN SOSIAL
ISSN: 2086-6135 E-ISSN: 2541-612x
Volume 15 No. 2. June 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

operates under conditions of weak formal institutionalization. This does not mean endorsing botoh practices as normatively desirable. It means recognizing that explaining electoral outcomes requires understanding the infrastructure that makes competition possible, not just lamenting its departure from idealized models of democratic procedure. Second, the concept shifts analytical focus from actor-level explanations (why do botoh buy votes? why do voters accept money?) to system-level understanding (how is electoral competition organized? what patterns of behavior stabilize expectations?). This shift is theoretically important because the persistence of botoh across regions and cycles suggests systemic causes that operate beyond the intentions of any individual actor. Third, the shadow infrastructure lens is potentially portable. Similar phenomena informal political actors who structure electoral competition through durable, patterned, socially embedded networks likely exist in other weakly institutionalized democracies. The concept may illuminate cases in the Philippines, Thailand, India, and beyond where formal electoral institutions coexist with powerful informal intermediaries (Sidel, 2018; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007).

Several theoretical implications follow. First, the Indonesian case suggests that informal institutions like botoh networks can exhibit positive complementarity with formal electoral rules (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Rather than undermining formal democracy in all respects, botoh reduce uncertainty for candidates and provide predictable mechanisms for voter mobilization functions that formal institutions, given Indonesia's fragmented party system and weak state capacity, cannot reliably perform. This complementarity helps explain why formal democratic procedures (elections, secret ballots, electoral commissions) have persisted alongside pervasive informal practices: the two are not necessarily in conflict but may be mutually sustaining. Second, the embeddedness of botoh in long-term social relationships indicates that theories of clientelism need to take kinship, reciprocity, and moral obligation more seriously as mechanisms of broker loyalty and voter compliance. Much of the existing literature focuses on material incentives and monitoring (Stokes et al., 2013; Nichter, 2008). The Indonesian evidence suggests that social ties and moral sentiments debt, gratitude, embarrassment, trust are equally if not more important. Third, the dependence of candidates on botoh suggests that informal political actors can achieve structural power within electoral systems, not merely transactional influence. When candidates cannot win without botoh, botoh gain the capacity to shape candidate selection, policy priorities, and post-election resource allocation. This finding complicates standard accounts of principal-agent relations in clientelism, which typically assume that candidates (principals) control brokers (agents). In Indonesia, the reverse is often true: botoh control candidates.

CONCLUSION

his article has demonstrated that botoh are not merely transactional vote buyers or tools used by candidates. A fundamental reorientation is required: botoh control elections in a deep and structural sense. They determine which candidates are permitted to run, which campaign strategies are viable, how resources are distributed across voters, and what happens after the votes are counted. Candidates do not use botoh as optional accessories; candidates submit to botoh networks because electoral victory is impossible without their participation. This finding challenges the implicit assumption in much of the clientelism literature that formal political actors (candidates, parties) are the principals and informal brokers are the agents. In the Indonesian case, the reverse is often true.

The empirical findings reveal that botoh perform three core functions mass mobilization, vote-buying coordination, and propaganda activism through hierarchical, socially embedded networks spanning the entire electoral cycle. Before elections, botoh act as gatekeepers who select which candidates gain access to local political networks. During elections, botoh coordinate sophisticated voter mapping, differentiated resource distribution, and gambling mechanisms that transform ordinary voters into active agents of electoral mobilization. After elections, botoh expect reciprocal returns and maintain the capacity to challenge, punish, or even remove non-compliant officials. Three systemic patterns emerge across regions and election cycles: standardization of practices across East Java, Central Java, and Kalimantan; recurrence of botoh networks across successive elections rather than ad hoc formation; and candidate dependence on botoh as essential infrastructure rather than optional tools. Botoh decide who runs, who wins, and who governs.

The concept of shadow electoral infrastructure captures this structural power. Botoh fill gaps that formal electoral rules cannot address. In a fragmented party system with weak state capacity and highly decentralized electoral arenas, candidates cannot reach voters, monitor compliance, or reduce electoral uncertainty without relying on pre-

existing local networks. Botoh provide this infrastructure. They are not deviations from formal democracy but the real organizing force beneath its visible surface. Candidates occupy the front stage of campaign rallies, media appearances, and policy promises. Botoh control the back stage of voter mapping, cash distribution, and post-election enforcement. Recognizing this reality reframes the normative evaluation of Indonesian democracy. The question is not whether botoh are good or bad but how their shadow infrastructure operates and what conditions would be required to shift electoral organization toward more formal, accountable, and transparent mechanisms. Until such conditions emerge, botoh will remain the decisive actors in Indonesian electoral politics.

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Sosioedukasi
JURNAL ILMIAH ILMU PENDIDIKAN DAN SOSIAL
ISSN: 2086-6135 E-ISSN: 2541-612x
Volume 15 No. 2. June 2026 https://ejournal.unibabwi.ac.id/index.php/sosioedukasi/index

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