

# Campaign Strategies and Social Network Dynamics: Unveiling the Victory of Candidates in the 2024 Legislative Election in Kolaka Regency, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the campaign strategies and the role of social networks in shaping electoral success in the 2024 legislative elections in Kolaka Regency, Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, the research reveals that successful candidates primarily relied on community-based campaign strategies, emphasizing door-to-door outreach, participation in religious and cultural events, and symbolic acts of social solidarity. Rather than formal party platforms, candidates' presence and emotional closeness with voters influenced voter behavior. The findings demonstrate that social networks, particularly kinship ties, religious groups such as Majelis Taklim, and youth communities served as critical channels for political mobilization. Candidates embedded in these networks gained greater visibility and legitimacy, which was essential for electoral trust. In semi-urban areas like Watubangga and Tanggetada, digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram were also used strategically, especially among young voters. However, the effectiveness of digital communication was deeply rooted in offline relational capital. The study also underscores the persistence of patron-client relations in local electoral dynamics. Voter support was frequently driven by past personal assistance, social reciprocity, and community recognition rather than policy considerations. Patronage was not always transactional; it often took the form of moral obligations and long-term social investment. Overall, the research highlights that effective electoral strategies in Kolaka are built on message delivery, sustained social engagement, and embeddedness in local relational structures.

**Keywords:** Legislative Elections, Campaign Strategy, Social Networks, Patron-Client Relations, Political Communication.

## I. Introduction

Legislative elections represent a democratic process that determines the policy direction of a region or country. In a dynamic democratic landscape where people's will shapes the course of governance, individuals referred to as candidates embark on a challenging journey to secure seats in parliament with a strong desire to contribute to legislative processes. In this political contest, candidates must carefully design strategies to gain support from voters. Pursuing political representation demands more than mere aspiration; it requires deliberate planning, measurable strategies, and a nuanced understanding of the evolving political dynamics. As Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue, candidates must navigate intense and complex competition to win legislative seats, which necessitates the development of effective and context-sensitive campaign strategies. In legislative elections, campaign strategy is critical in determining a candidate's electability. Success in securing political support does not solely rely on individual popularity but also on how well a candidate constructs and implements systematic, adaptive strategies grounded in the socio-political realities of the electorate. Scammell (2014) emphasizes that effective political strategies always respond to local contexts, voter segmentation, and pre-existing social relations. In this regard, political campaigns are inseparable from the social, cultural, and economic conditions of the communities in which candidates compete. Social networks play a central role as media for political mobilization and the consolidation of electoral support. These networks, including kinship ties, religious organizations, professional associations, and interest-based groups, serve as effective channels of political communication. Coleman (1988) argues that social capital embedded in these networks can enhance cohesion and trust, strengthening political support.

The 2024 legislative election (Pileg) in Kolaka Regency presents an intriguing case for examining political contestation, particularly about campaign strategies and the dynamics of social networks that shaped candidates' electoral success. As with previous elections, the success of legislative candidates was influenced not merely by their political party affiliation but also by the effectiveness of the campaign strategies they employed and the strength of the social networks supporting them. Voter preferences were significantly affected by kinship ties, patron-client relations, and the roles of local organizations and community-based groups. This finding aligns with Aspinall and Berenschot's (2019) observation that patronage-based relationships, traditional social structures, and the symbolic influence of non-state actors profoundly shape local politics in Indonesia. In regions such as Kolaka, where social cohesion remains strong, support from religious figures, customary leaders, and key community actors often becomes a decisive factor in determining electoral outcomes. Building and maintaining social networks within this complex political landscape is not merely an optional campaign tactic but a prerequisite for achieving political success.

The presence of civil society organizations and local communities in Kolaka Regency plays a significant role in shaping the political orientation of the electorate. Social networks formed through religion-based, ethnic, youth, and professional organizations often serve as effective channels for candidates to secure political support. Pepinsky et al. (2022) highlight that involvement in local social networks directly influences voting behavior by fostering mutual trust and collective loyalty. Candidates who are closely affiliated with religious leaders or actively participate in faith-based activities are generally more readily accepted by religious communities. In addition to religious factors, ethnically based networks also influence political dynamics in Kolaka. The regency is home to diverse ethnic groups, including Tolaki, Bugis, Makassar, Javanese, and several migrant communities. Genealogical and kinship ties often become the primary determinants of political support. Candidates who share ethnic identity with the majority population in a given area tend to have a greater chance of receiving electoral backing, especially when they demonstrate responsiveness to the aspirations of their ethnic group. In addition, youth communities and social organizations also play a significant role in local political processes. Organizations such as Karang Taruna, youth entrepreneurship groups, and hobby-based communities often serve as effective channels of political communication, particularly among young voters. With the advancement of information technology and the increasing use of social media, these communities have also become key drivers in disseminating political information and shaping public opinion at the local level. Therefore, the success of candidates in winning legislative elections in Kolaka Regency is not solely determined by formal campaign strategies, but also by the extent to which

they can build and optimize deeply rooted social networks within the community. Civil society organizations and local communities function as intermediaries in political communication and influential actors in shaping voter perceptions and collectively directing political support.

The study of campaign strategies and the role of social networks in the 2024 Legislative Election (Pileg) in Kolaka Regency represents an academic urgency that requires comprehensive examination. This research analyzes how specific political figures secured significant voter support and identifies the key factors contributing to their electoral success. By exploring patterns of interaction between candidates and voters and examining how social networks function as instruments of political mobilization, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of local electoral dynamics. Furthermore, this research enriches academic literature on voter behavior and political strategy and offers practical implications for candidates and political parties in designing more effective campaign approaches for future elections. Understanding the patterns behind candidate victories in local legislative contests can serve as a valuable reference for stakeholders in developing political strategies grounded in empirical data and strategic analysis.

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Studies on campaign strategies and social networks in elections have grown extensively in the political science literature globally and within the Indonesian context. In democratic systems, political campaigns function as tools for message dissemination and as crucial mechanisms for building relationships between candidates and voters (Scammell, 2014). In Indonesia, the socially diverse nature of its population and the strength of local communal ties make socially networked campaign strategies particularly relevant and often more effective than formal institutional approaches (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016). Campaign strategy is generally defined as a series of planned actions to secure voter support through targeted political communication. This includes mass media, social media, face-to-face meetings, and community network mobilization. Gibson and McAllister (2015) emphasize that technological advancement has transformed the campaign landscape into a more dynamic and interactive arena, particularly with the rise of social media, accelerating the spread of political information. However, in the context of local elections in Indonesia, conventional campaign approaches that rely on personal relations and social proximity remain dominant. Research by Mujani and Liddle (2010) suggests that Indonesian voters prioritize candidates' individual qualities over party ideology, making the personalization of campaigns increasingly important. In such contexts, a candidate's ability to establish direct communication through community meetings or door-to-door visits becomes an especially effective strategy. In the political context, social networks refer to social relationships that can be mobilized to support specific political objectives. This concept aligns with Coleman's (1988) theory of social capital, which argues that social networks provide structures of trust, norms, and reciprocal obligations that facilitate collective action, including participation in elections. In Indonesia, social networks encompass genealogical ties, religious organizations, ethnic communities, and youth groups, all playing vital roles in shaping public opinion and political preferences (Hidayat, 2019). In legislative elections, candidates with access to strong social networks are generally more capable of consolidating political support. Lim (2020) notes that the combination of traditional social networks and digital platforms forms an effective hybrid model of political mobilization, particularly among younger voters. This dynamic is also evident in electoral contests in regions like Kolaka, where groups such as Majelis Taklim, women's religious study circles (*pengajian*), youth entrepreneurship networks, and organizations like Karang Taruna often serve as key bridges for strengthening the connection between candidates and their voter base.

Meanwhile, patron-client relations remain a crucial component of local political strategies. Berenschot (2018) observed that in local elections in Indonesia, voters often make political choices based on personal relationships and reciprocal services, rather than ideological alignment or party platforms. This phenomenon is evident in Kolaka, where traditional leaders, religious figures, and community elites play symbolic and instrumental roles in influencing political preferences. On the other hand, local studies such as the one conducted by Wahidah (2022) in Southeast Sulawesi demonstrate that the success of legislative

candidates is primarily influenced by personalized approaches and active participation in social and community activities, rather than by the strength of political parties alone. These findings indicate that the power of social networks and adherence to local values remain central elements in shaping regional electoral dynamics.

Literature on campaign strategies and social networks indicates that a candidate's success in elections is significantly influenced by their ability to integrate modern political communication approaches with the strength of local social structures. While media innovations, particularly digital platforms, have become vital tools for disseminating political messages to a broader audience, they cannot fully replace the role of traditional social relations grounded in trust and emotional proximity. In regions such as Kolaka Regency, where social cohesion and communal ties remain deeply embedded, campaign strategies that effectively combine technological communication with personal social engagement are the most effective in securing substantial electoral support.

### III. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study method. This approach was selected as it enables the researcher to explore the campaign strategies and the dynamics of social networks within a specific socio-political context. The case study is considered appropriate because the research focuses on a single phenomenon, namely, the 2024 Legislative Election (Pileg) in Kolaka Regency and on particular actors involved in the process. The qualitative approach also provides flexibility in uncovering meanings, social relationships, and processes that quantitative measurements cannot adequately capture. As Creswell (2014) asserts, qualitative research aims to understand phenomena within their natural social context rather than merely measuring relationships between variables. This research was conducted in Kolaka Regency, Southeast Sulawesi Province, an area characterized by dynamic local politics and strong social networks rooted in kinship ties, traditional community structures, and religious organizations. The selection of this location was based on the relevance of Kolaka's socio-political context to the focus of the study. The research was carried out from February to June 2024, covering pre- and post-election periods. This time frame allowed for a comprehensive data collection on campaign dynamics and public responses throughout the legislative election process.

The subjects of this study consisted of: elected legislative candidates in the 2024 election (serving as the primary case study), members of the candidate's campaign team (including field coordinators, campaign staff, and volunteers), community figures (including religious leaders, traditional leaders, and youth leaders), and voters from diverse backgrounds (in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity). The selection of subjects was carried out using purposive sampling, based on the relevance of each subject to the research focus and their potential to provide rich, meaningful information (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The data for this study were collected using the following qualitative methods:

1. In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected candidates, campaign teams, community leaders, and voters. An open-ended question guide was used to explore campaign strategies and the role of social networks in electoral processes. These interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of the narratives, experiences, and perceptions of each actor involved in the campaign.

2. Participant Observation

The researcher directly observed campaign activities and political-social interactions in the field. This method aimed to capture how social networks functioned in practice and how the electorate communicated and received campaign messages. Observations focused on both formal and informal campaign events.

3. Document Analysis

A variety of documents were examined, including campaign materials (pamphlets, videos, social media posts), official vote recapitulation results from the General Election Commission (KPU), local

media reports, and internal documents from campaign teams (when accessible). This triangulation helped to validate findings and enrich contextual understanding.

The data in this study were analyzed using a descriptive qualitative approach through the following stages:

1. **Data Reduction:** This involved selecting and simplifying data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents, according to the research focus.
2. **Data Display:** The reduced data were organized thematically into narratives and tables to identify emerging patterns and relationships among the findings.
3. **Conclusion Drawing:** The researcher concluded by identifying key themes such as patterns of campaign strategies, the role of social networks, and determining factors of electoral success.

This analytical process follows the interactive model of qualitative data analysis developed by Miles and Huberman (2014), which emphasizes a cyclical and reflective process throughout data interpretation.

#### IV. Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the study's findings concerning campaign strategies and the dynamics of social networks that contributed to the success of candidates in the 2024 Legislative Elections (Pileg) in Kolaka Regency, Indonesia. The data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and were then analyzed qualitatively to provide a holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The discussion in this chapter goes beyond descriptive presentation; it offers a critical analysis of how the strategies employed by candidates intersect with the existing social structures within the community. The interpretive process is guided by theoretical frameworks, particularly the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988), political personalization (Mujani & Liddle, 2010), and patron-client relationships in Indonesian local politics (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016).

The analysis in this study focuses on examining the interrelation between the campaign strategies employed by candidates and the strength of the social networks they possess. These two elements are not treated as separate entities but as mutually reinforcing and dynamically interacting factors shaping political preferences and voting behavior. Campaign strategies that are personal, participatory, and contextually grounded are believed to be more effective when channeled through social networks that are deeply embedded in everyday community life, such as kinship ties, religious groups, and local ethnic communities. Candidates who can align their political communication strategies with the characteristics of existing social networks successfully convey their political messages and build emotional bonds and trust, which serve as the foundation for electoral decision-making. In this context, social networks function as both a source of social legitimacy and a mechanism of informal yet highly effective political mobilization. The strategic utilization of social networks thus enhances campaign outreach, accelerates the dissemination of information, and shapes favorable perceptions of candidates among voters. Through this analytical approach, this study's findings are expected to portray the surface-level success of campaign strategies and uncover the structural and cultural relationships underpinning electoral dynamics at the local level. Understanding the contribution of informal networks in local political processes is essential to reveal how traditional societal patterns continue to play a significant role in the era of modern electoral democracy. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on voter behavior in Indonesia and serves as a valuable reference for political campaign strategists seeking to develop socially grounded and culturally contextualized approaches, especially in regions with strong communal ties.

##### 4.1. Candidate Campaign Strategies in the 2024 Legislative Elections in Kolaka Regency

Campaign strategy is crucial in determining a candidate's success in gaining voter support. In the context of the 2024 Legislative Election in Kolaka Regency, the campaign strategies employed by candidates

reflect a distinctive pattern combining community-based approaches with communication techniques tailored to the region's sociocultural dynamics. This section outlines the various strategies adopted and their relevance to the local social structure. The findings indicate that successful candidates in Kolaka adopted inclusive, community-rooted campaign strategies, selectively integrating personal and digital communication approaches. This reflects an adaptive effort by candidates to engage a diverse electorate within a society bound by strong kinship values, religious observance, and ethnic solidarity. Direct campaigning, particularly door-to-door interactions, emerged as the dominant method, especially in rural and suburban areas where voters tend to be conservative and prioritize face-to-face engagement. In interviews, candidates and campaign teams emphasized that visiting constituents personally fosters a sense of humility and genuine concern that cannot be easily conveyed through formal campaign media. This aligns with Lim's (2020) findings that social proximity remains a primary foundation of political trust in local contexts, even amidst the expansion of digital media.

Moreover, participation in community-based activities such as women's religious gatherings (pengajian), neighborhood meetings (RT forums), and local cultural ceremonies like Mosehe Wonua, Monahu Ndau, and Mesambakai serves as a strategic space for candidates to assert their presence without appearing overtly political. Candidates involved in religious and traditional events demonstrate cultural literacy and gain symbolic acceptance as part of the community. This approach reflects cultural politics, where everyday symbols and social practices become meaningful tools in building political relationships. To better understand how candidates built grassroots support, this study recorded the frequency and distribution of direct campaign activities conducted during the 2024 election period in Electoral District III of Kolaka. Field observations and interview data confirm that face-to-face, community-based engagement remained the dominant strategy. Personal interactions, whether in household visits, participation in local customs, or involvement in religious and social events, proved to be the primary means of building emotional closeness and social trust between candidates and voters.

**Table 1. Frequency and Location of Candidates' Direct Campaign Activities in Electoral District III, Kolaka (2024 Legislative Election)**

No	Type of Campaign Activity	Number of Activities	Location/Subdistrict	Remarks
1	Door-to-door visits	48 points	Watubangga (13), Tanggetada (10), Toari (15), Polinggona (10)	Conducted within 4 weeks prior to election day
2	Participation in religious gatherings	12 times	Tanggetada (5), Toari (4), Polinggona (3)	Mostly in female Islamic study groups (Majelis Taklim)
3	Attendance at cultural or traditional events	7 times	Watubangga (2), Toari (3), Polinggona (2)	Includes harvest rituals ( <i>metahuna</i> ) and traditional dances ( <i>modero</i> )
4	Attendance at community social events	10 times	Spread across four subdistricts	Includes weddings, Thanksgiving ceremonies, and childbirth celebrations
5	Engagement with youth groups and Karang Taruna	5 times	Tanggetada (2), Toari (1), Watubangga (1), Polinggona (1)	Focused on youth empowerment and small business discussions
6	Informal discussion at coffee stalls/warungs	9 times	Various village gathering points	Used to foster informal dialogue and listen to public complaints
7	Participation in community service	4 times	Toari (2), Watubangga (1), Polinggona (1)	Strengthened image of solidarity and community concern

Source: Data processed by the researcher, 2024.

Table 1 indicates that the most frequently employed campaign method was door-to-door visits, followed by attendance at religious gatherings and community social events. This strategy aligns with the social characteristics of Kolaka society, which continues to uphold personal interaction, kinship ties, and physical presence as expressions of a candidate's genuine concern. The high frequency of candidate participation in community activities suggests that political campaigns are most effective not in formal spaces, but within informal social arenas such as religious study groups, family celebrations, and local gathering spots like warungs and neighborhood meetings. This approach supports the theory of political personalization (Mujani & Liddle, 2010), which emphasizes the importance of building emotional and direct relationships between candidates and voters. Additionally, the strategic use of local social networks in determining campaign points demonstrates social capital's utility, as Coleman (1988) proposed, where trust and social solidarity function as key drivers in mobilizing electoral support.

Meanwhile, among younger voters and those in more urbanized areas, candidates utilized locally based digital platforms such as extended family WhatsApp groups, hometown Facebook communities, and socially curated Instagram accounts. Information about the candidates' social involvement, condolences, birthday greetings, and community presence was shared in an informal and approachable manner. This reflects a form of soft campaigning that is personal, non-aggressive, yet consistently effective in shaping a positive digital image. Theoretically, this reinforces the personalization model in which candidates are perceived not as party figures but as individuals with direct and emotional ties to the electorate. Rather than presenting themselves as political elites, candidates portray themselves as ordinary citizens embedded in daily social life. In such contexts, voters prioritize the candidate's personality, availability, and social concern over abstract programs or political promises.

Findings also suggest that local cultural narratives are powerful symbolic tools in campaigns. Using local languages such as Tolaki, Bugis, or Makassar in campaign communication is not merely functional, but also a symbolic strategy to build a sense of belonging between candidates and ethnically aligned communities. Candidates who share ethnic or genealogical ties with local communities often receive "moral support" that materializes in votes on election day. Practices such as contributing to family events, attending funerals, or joining informal neighborhood gatherings form part of an unstructured yet impactful form of indirect campaigning. These findings indicate that successful campaign strategies in Kolaka rely heavily on the candidate's social capacity to establish everyday relational bonds more than on financial resources or political rhetoric. Overall, the campaign strategies adopted by winning candidates in Kolaka demonstrate a blend of traditional and adaptive approaches rooted in local social norms yet responsive to changing communication patterns. Their success illustrates the critical importance of understanding local sociocultural contexts as the foundation for designing political strategies that reach voters and build long-term trust and emotional closeness.

#### 4.2. The Role of Social Networks in Supporting Electoral Victory

Social networks are crucial in local politics, bridging candidates and voters within more personal and culturally embedded contexts. In this study, social networks proved to be highly effective instruments for mobilizing electoral support, particularly in regions where collective values and communal bonds remain central to social organization, such as in Kolaka Regency. Based on in-depth interviews and field observations, three primary types of social networks were identified as being most frequently utilized by successful candidates: kinship networks, religious organizations, and youth-digital communities. Each network type plays a specific role in amplifying campaign messages and informally shaping voter preferences in socially grounded and politically impactful ways.

#### 4.2.1. Kinship Networks and Genealogical Ties

Political support in many villages within Electoral District III (Dapil III) of Kolaka is strongly influenced by blood relations and ethnic affiliations. Candidates who originate from dominant ethnic groups in specific areas, such as the Tolaki in Toari Subdistrict or the Bugis in Watubangga, tend to receive significantly higher vote shares. Voting data from four villages in Toari reveal that approximately 67–72% of voters cast their ballots for candidates who share ethnic or genealogical ties with the local population. This finding supports Coleman's (1988) theory that social capital built upon trust, shared norms, and identity can create strong social cohesion. In the context of local elections, such social capital functions as a source of moral support and a decisive factor in shaping community-wide political preferences. When a candidate shares an ethnic or familial bond with the majority of the electorate, political engagement is no longer perceived as an individual pursuit but as a collective affirmation of the community's social identity.

In this setting, elections become more than a competition among individuals; they serve as symbolic affirmations of internal community solidarity. As one traditional leader noted in an interview, "We are of the same bloodline, so supporting him is a duty. This is not just politics, it is about the community's dignity." Such statements highlight that political choices are often driven not by individual rationality but by relational dynamics that are both symbolic and cultural. Supporting a candidate is seen as a gesture of respect toward long-standing and inherited social networks. Furthermore, this condition illustrates that voter loyalty is not merely the result of persuasive campaigning but often represents a social commitment to collective identity structures. Candidates who consistently maintain these ties through social presence, support for local agendas, and embodying community values are more likely to secure enduring political support. This suggests that identity-based social capital remains a central determinant in local politics, such as in Kolaka, surpassing the influence of party affiliation or formal political programs.

#### 4.2.2. Religious Organizations and Religious Leaders as Electoral Networks

Religious organizations such as Majelis Taklim, women's Qur'anic study groups, and mosque-based youth communities serve as platforms for spiritual development and strategic informal socio-political spaces for candidates to build their public image and gain electoral support. In the context of Kolaka, where religiosity constitutes an essential part of social identity, participation in religious activities holds significant symbolic value. Such involvement fosters emotional proximity and moral legitimacy in the eyes of voters. Field observations and campaign tracking reveal that of the 10 religious gatherings attended by candidates during the campaign period, 8 showed a notable increase in votes at nearby polling stations (TPS), with an average rise of 18–25% compared to other TPS within the same village. For instance, in TPS 04 of Tanggetada Village, following the candidate's participation in a women's religious gathering a week prior to election day, the number of votes increased from the previous average of 70 to 91. This trend is not coincidental but indicates a structured social influence operating through religious networks.

Berenschot (2018) describes this effect as horizontal persuasion, where political influence is transmitted laterally through trusted local figures, rather than formal institutional channels. In religious communities, mosque leaders and respected religious figures function as opinion leaders, whose views serve as critical references for voters' political decisions. As a housewife in Tanggetada expressed, "We trust him because he is active at the mosque, so inshaAllah he is trustworthy." This highlights how spiritual credibility often translates into perceived political integrity. Furthermore, a candidate's involvement in religious events is not merely performative. It symbolizes recognition of community values and signals alignment with the religious and moral identity of the electorate. In a society where religion, culture, and politics intertwine fluidly, such symbolic alignment often becomes a key determinant of electoral preference, especially among women and elderly voters actively involved in religious study groups. In this context, religious organizations are no longer politically neutral. They evolve into socio-political actors that function as intermediaries between candidates and voters and serve as moral filters who help legitimize those considered worthy of public office.

Consequently, a candidate's active presence in religious communities is a campaign strategy and a means of building public trust rooted in spiritual and local cultural values.

#### 4.2.3. Youth and Digital Community Networks

Young voters in semi-urban areas such as Watubangga and Tanggetada exhibit distinct patterns of political engagement compared to other age groups. They are more actively connected through horizontal communities such as Karang Taruna (youth organizations), motorcycle clubs, village-based entrepreneurship groups, and local online forums. These social formations serve as strategic entry points for candidates to establish more dynamic and participatory political linkages. Candidates who share generational proximity with youth groups or engage millennial-based campaign teams tend to reach young voters more effectively through community-driven digital communication. Platforms such as localized WhatsApp groups, personal Instagram accounts, and community Facebook pages are the primary tools for disseminating political messages, campaign activities, and programmatic content tailored to younger constituents' interests and daily realities. Based on a four-week observation of social media interactions during the campaign period, it was found that visual posts related to candidates' social engagements such as participating in community clean-ups, distributing scholarships, or attending funerals and weddings received an average of 200–350 likes and 30–50 comments within the first 24 hours of posting. Additionally, short-form videos (around one minute) shared via Instagram Reels and Facebook Stories recorded up to 1,000 daily views, particularly when they depicted direct candidate involvement in youth or local community activities. However, the effectiveness of digital communication does not operate in isolation. Its impact depends significantly on the candidate's offline presence and the established relational trust within community networks. Digital media amplify influence, but social legitimacy remains grounded in real-world engagement.

**Table 2. Average Social Media Engagement on Community-Based Candidate Content (February–March 2024)**

Type of Content	Platform	Average Likes	Average Comments	Reach Estimate (Views)
Assisting with community clean-up	Instagram	310	47	980–1,100
Attending religious and youth gatherings	Facebook	270	35	750–850
Distributing scholarships/startup tools	WhatsApp Status	Not Applicable	Not Applicable	900+ (shared 10–15 times)
Participating in youth-led village projects	Instagram Reels	325	40	1,000+

Source: Data processed by the researcher, 2024.

The data indicates that high-engagement content is consistently associated with candidates' tangible and localized social involvement. Although digital platforms can amplify the dissemination of political messages, their effectiveness remains dependent on the legitimacy derived from candidates' physical and symbolic participation in community life. The findings suggest that digital content that garners significant engagement typically reflects the candidate's offline presence in community activities. For instance, posts documenting involvement in neighborhood clean-up efforts with youth organizations (e.g., Karang Taruna) or assistance in providing small business equipment to local youth groups exhibited a substantial increase in interaction, particularly when accompanied by visual evidence of direct participation. This illustrates that digital channels function most effectively when synergized with pre-existing social legitimacy built through face-to-face relational practices. In other words, political digital communication in Kolaka is insufficient if conducted purely top-down or one-directionally. It must be anchored in digital social capital formed through collective experiences and genuine community engagement. In this regard, social media does not replace

traditional social networks but extends and accelerates their influence. As Lim (2020) explains in the context of Indonesia, successful political use of social media is inherently personal, interactive, and supported by strong offline social structures. Therefore, the effectiveness of young candidates' digital campaigns in Kolaka cannot be separated from their presence within local youth networks, physically and symbolically.

#### 4.2.4. The Pattern of Patron-Client Relations in the 2024 Legislative Election in Kolaka Regency

One of the key findings of this study is the persistent presence of patron-client relationships in the electoral dynamics of Kolaka Regency, particularly in Electoral District (Dapil) III. This relationship does not manifest through explicit vote-buying, but rather through more subtle and sustained social practices, such as providing informal assistance, the candidate's presence during significant communal events, and symbolic recognition of personal closeness to the community. Within this structure, the candidate acts as the patron possessing social, economic, or institutional capital. At the same time, the voter assumes the role of the client, offering political support as a form of reciprocation or social loyalty. This relationship often evolves and is built on shared engagement experiences between both parties. In-depth interviews revealed that 62% of respondents in Toari and Tanggetada villages supported their candidate not because of party affiliation or campaign programs, but because the candidate had previously provided help or was known to be close to the community. As one woman in Tanggetada remarked, "When my husband passed away, he was the only one who came to help with the funeral. I will never forget that, so we agreed to support him." Such statements illustrate that political support in this context is often grounded in social memory and affective experiences, rather than ideological or policy-based considerations.

Observational data showed that the candidate received significantly higher vote shares in polling stations within a 500-meter radius of where the candidate was socially active, such as disaster response, funeral support, or mosque construction. For example, in Polling Station 06 in Watubangga, a candidate known for helping students with educational expenses secured 56% of the vote, in contrast to only 20–25% in areas where no such involvement was recorded. Patron-client ties in Kolaka are multidimensional, encompassing personal (kinship, friendship), professional (civil servant, former village head, teacher), and symbolic relations (religious donor, customary figure). Candidates with long-standing community engagement deserve more support because they have "done something first, before asking for votes." One traditional Polinggona leader stated, "We support him because he did not just show up during the campaign. He was there when no one else was." This finding aligns with Berenschot's (2018) perspective that patronage in Indonesia operates within a complex social space, where trust and loyalty are the primary political currencies. Voters do not act as rational liberal citizens but as community members bound by norms of reciprocity and moral obligation. Berenschot calls this a "clientelistic democracy," where personal relationships drive more political choices than programmatic agendas.

Moreover, political patronage in Kolaka is not always transactional or immediately compensated. Candidates rarely promise cash or material rewards but offer symbolic social gestures, such as attending local religious events, donating cement to build mosques, or assisting with hospital costs. These forms of patronage are often more meaningful to voters, as they resonate with local values of compassion and social responsibility. The relationship is asymmetric but stable, as both parties understand their roles and expectations. Voters do not feel objectified, but rather valued as social partners. Meanwhile, candidates see public support as the result of long-term social investment, rather than the product of short-term campaigning. In conclusion, this study shows that in local electoral contests, such as in Kolaka, patron-client relationships remain a central axis of electoral support formation. Successful campaign strategies do not necessarily rely on digital platforms or formal programs but prioritize building, maintaining, and strengthening social trust through direct, sustained community engagement. Symbolic capital and deeply embedded social ties ultimately carry more weight than short-term political messaging.

## V. Conclusion

This study reveals that the success of candidates in the 2024 Legislative Election in Kolaka Regency was primarily determined by their ability to build and manage campaign strategies rooted in the local community's social structure. The campaigns employed were not limited to formal approaches such as banners or party programs, but were deeply embedded in personal engagement and participation in everyday social and community life. Community-based approaches, such as door-to-door visits, involvement in religious gatherings, traditional ceremonies, and local social events, proved to be the most effective methods. These strategies reflect the practice of political personalization, in which candidates build direct emotional connections with voters as individuals rather than as mere party representatives. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook community groups, and Instagram were also utilized. However, their effectiveness was strongly supported by candidates' offline social capital and real presence in the community.

The findings further emphasize that social networks are crucial in shaping and directing voter preferences. Kinship ties, religious organizations, and youth communities are key political mobilization, communication, and informal social control channels. Candidates embedded within these networks, whether through ethnic background, religious affiliation, or generational and cultural proximity, were more likely to gain social legitimacy and electoral support. Additionally, the study found that patron-client relations remain a dominant structure in local political practice. Voter support was often driven by personal experiences, social assistance, and emotional proximity established well before the campaign. In this context, votes are viewed as moral reciprocity, and the candidate's social engagement is perceived as a long-term political investment. This dynamic suggests that electoral loyalty in Kolaka is not entirely rational or program-based but is rooted in trust, social recognition, and norms of mutual obligation within the community. Ultimately, successful campaign strategies in Kolaka rely on the strength of local social networks, personal outreach, and sustained community involvement. Electoral success is not primarily determined by formal party structures or modern media campaigns, but rather by how well a candidate is embedded in long-standing social trust networks. Local politics in Kolaka demonstrate that identity, social relations, and everyday practices play a more decisive role than ideological discourse or policy platforms in shaping electoral outcomes.

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