

Changes in Voters' Perspectives in Selecting Leaders in the Era of Regional Autonomy in Kendari City

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of voters' perspectives in local executive elections in the era of regional autonomy, using Kendari City, Southeast Sulawesi Province, as a case study during the 2025–2030 election period. The research is grounded in the context of Indonesia's decentralization, which has reshaped local political competition and voter-candidate interactions. Employing a qualitative research design, the study integrates qualitative surveys, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. A total of 30 informants were purposively selected from key stakeholder groups, including voters, election management officials (KPU), local government representatives, civil society organizations, and political party actors. The findings reveal that voters' perspectives in Kendari are undergoing a dynamic transformation rather than a linear shift toward performance-based voting. While many voters increasingly emphasize candidates' track records, public service delivery, and responsiveness, social proximity, personal familiarity, and pragmatic considerations continue to influence electoral preferences. The study also identifies growing public protest and rejection of candidates perceived as non-pro-people, reflecting heightened democratic awareness and the role of civil society in fostering critical engagement. However, such protest remains unevenly distributed across socio-economic groups

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization and regional autonomy in Indonesia were designed to bring public decision-making closer to citizens and to strengthen political accountability through direct local executive elections (Ostwald, et al., 2016). Within the framework of electoral democracy theory, local elections are expected to function as a mechanism through which voters evaluate government performance and decide whether political mandates should be renewed (Evans, 2014). However, empirical studies indicate that the relationship between government performance and voter choice at the local level is not always linear and is often distorted by local socio-political contexts (Lewis, 2020; Berenschot, 2019).

At the empirical level, local executive elections in many Indonesian regions continue to be characterized by clientelism, vote buying, and the prominent role of political brokers. The literature on voting behavior suggests that voter preferences are shaped not only by policy platforms and performance considerations, but also by social ties, personal proximity to candidates, and short-term material incentives (Allen, 2015; Muhtadi, 2019). These social realities challenge the assumption of voter rationality embedded in retrospective voting models, particularly in areas with strong social cohesion and economic dependency.

Kendari City, as the capital of Southeast Sulawesi Province, offers an important case for examining these dynamics. Since the implementation of regional autonomy, Kendari has experienced administrative expansion, demographic growth, and increasing political competition, while local social networks remain influential (Bake, 2024). In the context of the 2025–2030 local executive election period, there is still limited empirical research examining how voters in Kendari perceive and interpret local elections—whether voter orientations are shifting toward performance-based evaluation or whether clientelistic practices are being reproduced and transformed (Sobari, 2014). This gap highlights the need for context-specific analysis linking democratic theory with local social realities.

Previous studies on local executive elections and regional autonomy in Indonesia have largely focused on institutional design, governance outcomes, and the relationship between decentralization and local democracy (Aminah, 2020; Hadiz, 2004; Aminah, et al., 2020). These studies emphasize the importance of elections as democratic instruments but tend to pay limited attention to voters' evolving perceptions as active political agents (Dalton, et al., 2011; Banducci, et al., 2003).

Conversely, research on voting behavior and clientelism has concentrated on micro-level mechanisms of preference formation, particularly vote buying, brokerage networks, and the personalization of local politics (Allen, 2015; Triantini et al., 2017). While these studies successfully explain how transactional politics operates within Indonesia's electoral democracy, they often remain analytically detached from broader institutional changes associated with regional autonomy.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrative analytical approach, combining institutional perspectives on decentralization with socio-cognitive transformations in voter perceptions. By employing survey data, focus group discussions, and document analysis, this research examines how voters in Kendari City negotiate evaluations of local government performance, social identity, candidate proximity, and material incentives within a single analytical framework. This approach advances the literature by moving beyond dichotomous views of voters as either rational evaluators or purely clientelistic actors.

This article aims to analyze the transformation of voters' perspectives in local executive elections in Kendari City during the era of regional autonomy, particularly in the context of the 2025–2030 election period. It examines how local government performance, socio-political networks, and clientelistic practices shape voter preferences based on findings from surveys, focus group discussions, and document analysis (Berenschot, 2019; Aminah, 2020).

The central argument of this study is that regional autonomy does not eliminate relational and transactional politics but rather transforms how voters perceive and rationalize them. In Kendari City, voters are not merely passive or irrational actors; instead, they pragmatically combine performance evaluations with considerations of social proximity and material incentives within the evolving structures of local post-decentralization politics (Lewis, 2020; Triantini et al., 2017).

Academically, this study contributes to the literature on local democracy and decentralization by providing empirical evidence from an under-researched urban context in Eastern Indonesia. Practically, the findings are expected to inform policymakers, electoral management bodies, and civil society organizations in designing voter education programs, anti-vote-buying strategies, and accountability mechanisms that are responsive to local political realities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Regional Autonomy and Decentralization in Democratic Governance

Regional autonomy or decentralization refers to the transfer of political, administrative, and fiscal authority from the central government to local governments. In democratic systems, decentralization is expected to strengthen local governance, increase public participation, and improve accountability between leaders and citizens. In many countries, including Indonesia, regional autonomy reforms aim to enhance community welfare and democratic participation through greater local decision-making authority (Hoesein et al., 2022).

The decentralization framework emphasizes that political authority at the local level creates new opportunities for citizens to influence governance through elections and political participation. When local governments gain autonomy, citizens become more directly involved in selecting leaders who are responsible for local development and public service delivery (Niedzwiecki & Stoyan, 2018).

Empirical studies show that decentralization can increase political participation and voter turnout. The political dimension of self-rule – such as the

authority to elect local leaders – has been shown to significantly enhance civic engagement and democratic accountability.

Thus, regional autonomy fundamentally reshapes the relationship between citizens and political leaders. Local elections become an important mechanism through which citizens evaluate leadership quality, policy performance, and responsiveness to local needs (Devas et al., 2003).

2. Changing Voter Preferences in Local Elections

Regional autonomy also transforms the criteria voters use in selecting leaders (Kenig, 2009; Schakel et al., 2022). In centralized political systems, voters often rely on national political narratives or party affiliations. However, in decentralized systems, voters increasingly evaluate candidates based on:

- local policy performance
- service delivery capacity
- personal reputation and integrity
- ability to address regional development issues

Research on local elections indicates that voters often prioritize candidates who promise tangible benefits for their communities, such as economic development, employment opportunities, and improved public services.

In addition, local political dynamics such as family networks, social groups, and community leadership also influence voting decisions (Lowndes et al., 2004).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design with a case study approach to examine the transformation of voters' perspectives in local executive elections in the era of regional autonomy. A qualitative design is considered appropriate because the study seeks to capture voters' subjective interpretations, meanings, and rationalizations regarding local elections, rather than to test causal relationships through statistical inference (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on Kendari City, Southeast Sulawesi Province, the research situates voter perceptions within a specific socio-political and institutional context shaped by decentralization.

The study integrates three data collection methods – survey, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis – to enhance analytical depth and ensure data triangulation. This mixed qualitative strategy enables the researcher to explore both individual-level perspectives and broader institutional narratives surrounding the 2025–2030 local executive election period (Denzin, 2012).

The research was conducted in Kendari City, the capital of Southeast Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. Kendari was selected due to its strategic role as an administrative, economic, and political center in Eastern Indonesia, as well as its dynamic experience with local elections under regional autonomy. The fieldwork was carried out over a period of six months, allowing sufficient time for data collection, verification, and iterative analysis. The study focuses on the 2025–2030 local election cycle, capturing both anticipatory and reflective perspectives on local executive elections.

The study involved 30 informants, selected using purposive sampling, which is commonly applied in qualitative research to identify participants who possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the research topic (Patton, 2015). The informants represent five key stakeholder groups: Voters from diverse socio-economic and demographic backgrounds; Election management officials from the General Election Commission (KPU) at the local level; Local government officials involved in governance and public service delivery; Civil society organizations (CSOs/NGOs) engaged in electoral monitoring and voter education; Political party representatives involved in candidate nomination and campaign activities. This diversity of informants allows the study to capture multiple perspectives on how voter perceptions are formed, negotiated, and transformed within Kendari's local political landscape.

A qualitative survey was administered to voter informants using open-ended questions designed to elicit narratives about electoral experiences, perceptions of candidate performance, attitudes toward vote buying, and expectations of local government accountability. Unlike quantitative surveys, this instrument prioritizes depth of response over numerical generalization and serves as an entry point for identifying recurring themes and patterns (Jansen, 2010).

FGDs were conducted with selected groups of voters and civil society actors to explore shared meanings, social norms, and collective interpretations of local executive elections. FGDs are particularly useful for examining how opinions are shaped through interaction and social discourse (Morgan, 1997). Each discussion was moderated using a semi-structured guide and documented through audio recordings and field notes.

Document analysis was employed to contextualize and corroborate findings from surveys and FGDs. The documents analyzed include electoral regulations, KPU reports, local government planning documents, campaign materials, and reports from civil society organizations. Document analysis enables the researcher to trace institutional narratives and policy frameworks influencing voter perceptions (Bowen, 2009).

Data analysis followed an interactive and iterative process, involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Interview transcripts, survey responses, FGD records, and documents were coded thematically using both deductive categories derived from the literature (e.g., performance evaluation, clientelism, social networks) and inductive categories emerging from the data. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how voters' perspectives evolve within the structures of regional autonomy.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applies several qualitative validation strategies, including data triangulation across methods and sources, member checking with selected informants, and peer debriefing during the analysis phase (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These procedures enhance the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

RESEARCH RESULT

1. Diverse Voter Perspectives on Local Executive Candidates

The findings indicate that voters in Kendari City hold highly diverse and dynamic perspectives regarding local executive candidates. Data from qualitative surveys and interviews with voter informants reveal that voter preferences are no longer shaped by a single dominant factor, such as party affiliation or ethnic proximity, but rather by a combination of performance-based considerations, personal credibility, and social embeddedness.

A significant group of voters emphasized track record and performance as the primary basis for evaluating candidates. These voters articulated expectations related to public service delivery, urban infrastructure, employment opportunities, and responsiveness of local government. Informants frequently referred to visible policy outcomes, such as road improvements, market revitalization, and flood mitigation efforts, as indicators of leadership quality. This pattern suggests the emergence of a more evaluative voter orientation aligned with retrospective voting logic, where past performance becomes a meaningful reference point in electoral decision-making.

However, another group of voters demonstrated a relational and pragmatic orientation toward candidates. For these voters, personal familiarity, accessibility, and social closeness to the candidate or campaign team played a central role. Interviews revealed that candidates perceived as “close to the people” were often favored, regardless of formal policy achievements. Social networks, neighborhood ties, and informal communication channels significantly influenced how information about candidates circulated and was interpreted. Field observations during community gatherings and campaign events further confirmed that face-to-face interactions remained a crucial strategy for building voter trust.

In addition, the study found that transactional considerations continued to shape voter perceptions, albeit in more nuanced forms. While overt vote buying was increasingly criticized by respondents, material assistance—such as donations for community events or social aid distributed during campaigns—was often rationalized as acceptable or even expected. Voters tended to distinguish between “money politics” perceived as coercive and transactional practices framed as social generosity. This distinction reflects a transformation in voter reasoning rather than a complete rejection of transactional politics, indicating adaptive rather than declining clientelism in Kendari’s local elections.

2. Public Protest and Rejection of Non-Pro-People Candidates

Beyond individual preferences, the study also documents collective expressions of protest and rejection toward candidates perceived as non-pro-people. Data from FGDs, observations, and document analysis highlight increasing public awareness and assertiveness among segments of Kendari’s electorate, particularly urban youth, civil society activists, and community leaders.

Several informants recounted instances where communities openly questioned candidates’ policy commitments during public forums and campaign events. Observational data show that campaign dialogues were no longer one-

directional; voters actively raised issues related to transparency, corruption, and elite capture. Candidates associated with unfulfilled promises, controversial policies, or perceived elite interests encountered visible resistance, including public criticism on social media and reduced attendance at campaign activities.

Civil society organizations in Kendari played a notable role in facilitating this critical engagement. Document analysis of NGO reports and voter education materials indicates a growing emphasis on issue-based evaluation and ethical leadership. NGOs organized public discussions, disseminated voter guides, and monitored campaign practices, contributing to a more informed electorate. These efforts amplified public scrutiny of candidates and legitimized protest as a democratic expression rather than a disruptive act.

Interviews with election management officials and local government representatives further corroborated these findings. KPU officials acknowledged increased public reporting of alleged violations and higher levels of citizen participation in monitoring campaigns. Although not all protests resulted in formal sanctions, their symbolic significance was evident. They signaled a shift in voter expectations – from passive recipients of campaign promises to active evaluators of candidate behavior and policy orientation.

Nevertheless, the study also found that protest and rejection were unevenly distributed across social groups. While middle-class and educated voters were more inclined to express opposition openly, economically vulnerable voters often adopted a more cautious stance. For these groups, immediate material concerns and dependency on local networks constrained overt resistance, even when dissatisfaction with candidates was expressed privately. This finding underscores the coexistence of critical democratic engagement and structural constraints within the same electoral context.

3. Variations in Academic and Institutional Interpretations

Analysis of academic publications, policy documents, and expert interviews reveals divergent interpretations of voter transformation in local elections. Some academic perspectives emphasize the gradual maturation of local democracy, pointing to increased voter awareness, issue-based evaluation, and declining tolerance for blatant money politics. From this viewpoint, the Kendari case reflects a broader trend toward more accountable and participatory local governance under regional autonomy.

Conversely, other interpretations stress the persistence and adaptation of clientelistic practices. Scholars and observers caution that changes in voter discourse do not necessarily translate into substantive behavioral shifts. While voters may articulate normative preferences for clean governance and pro-people policies, electoral choices remain embedded in social relations and material considerations. Document analysis of post-election evaluations suggests that transactional politics has become more subtle rather than obsolete, often operating through informal channels that are difficult to regulate.

Institutional documents from election management bodies and government agencies present yet another perspective, focusing on procedural improvements and regulatory compliance. These documents highlight increased voter turnout,

improved election logistics, and expanded voter education initiatives as indicators of democratic progress. However, they tend to understate the socio-economic factors influencing voter behavior, offering a more technocratic assessment of electoral quality.

The juxtaposition of these academic and institutional viewpoints underscores the complexity of interpreting voter transformation. The Kendari case illustrates that voter perspectives evolve in non-linear and context-dependent ways, shaped simultaneously by democratic norms, institutional reforms, and enduring social structures. Rather than representing a clear shift toward either rational-performance voting or entrenched clientelism, the findings suggest a hybrid pattern in which voters strategically navigate multiple logics.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that voters’ perspectives in Kendari City are undergoing a process of transformation rather than replacement. Performance evaluation, social proximity, and transactional reasoning coexist within voter decision-making, each gaining or losing salience depending on context and individual circumstances. Public protest against non-pro-people candidates reflects growing democratic consciousness, yet structural inequalities continue to limit the extent of collective resistance.

These findings confirm that regional autonomy has reshaped the political environment in which voters operate, expanding opportunities for participation and scrutiny while also allowing traditional practices to adapt. The transformation of voters’ perspectives in Kendari is therefore best understood as an ongoing negotiation between democratic ideals and pragmatic realities within Indonesia’s local electoral democracy.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings on the Transformation of Voters’ Perspectives in Kendari City

Dimension of Findings	Key Empirical Findings	Data Sources	Interpretation/ Meaning
Diverse voter perceptions of local executive candidates	Voters evaluate candidates based on a combination of performance record, personal credibility, social proximity, and perceived accessibility. Party affiliation is less dominant than in previous elections.	Interviews with voters, qualitative survey, observation	Indicates a shift from party-centered voting toward candidate-centered and performance-informed evaluation.
Performance-based considerations	Voters increasingly refer to visible policy outcomes such as infrastructure development, public	Interviews, survey responses, document analysis (local	Reflects the growing relevance of retrospective voting logic under

	services, and responsiveness of local government when assessing candidates.	development reports)	regional autonomy.
Relational and social proximity factors	Personal familiarity, neighborhood ties, and informal social networks remain influential in shaping voter trust and preferences.	Interviews, FGDs, field observation	Demonstrates the persistence of relational politics alongside performance evaluation.
Transactional rationalization by voters	Material assistance during campaigns is often tolerated or justified as social generosity, while overt vote buying is increasingly criticized.	Interviews, FGDs, survey	Suggests an adaptation of clientelism rather than its disappearance.
Public protest against non-pro-people candidates	Communities openly criticize candidates associated with elite interests, unfulfilled promises, or lack of public orientation during public forums and campaigns.	FGDs, observation, NGO reports	Signals rising voter assertiveness and democratic awareness among certain social groups.
Role of civil society organizations	NGOs facilitate voter education, issue-based discussions, and campaign monitoring, strengthening public scrutiny of candidates.	Document analysis, interviews with NGOs	Highlights the mediating role of civil society in shaping voter perspectives.
Uneven distribution of protest behavior	Middle-class and educated voters are more likely to express protest openly, while economically vulnerable voters tend to be cautious.	Interviews, FGDs	Reveals structural constraints affecting the expression of political dissent.
Academic interpretations	Some scholars view voter change as democratic	Academic literature,	Shows divergence in academic assessments of

of voter transformation	maturation, while others emphasize the persistence of subtle clientelism.	expert interviews	local electoral democracy.
Institutional perspectives on elections	Election authorities emphasize procedural improvements, voter turnout, and regulatory compliance.	KPU reports, official documents	Reflects a technocratic understanding of electoral quality.
Overall pattern of voter transformation	Voter perspectives combine democratic norms, pragmatic considerations, and social realities rather than shifting linearly toward a single model.	Synthesis of all data sources	Indicates a hybrid and context-dependent transformation of voter behavior.

DISCUSSION

This discussion interprets the research findings through a dialogue with established theories and empirical studies on local democracy, voter behavior, and decentralization. The analysis focuses on three interrelated themes: (1) diverse voter perspectives toward local executive candidates, (2) public protest and rejection of non-pro-people candidates, and (3) variations in academic interpretations of voter transformation under regional autonomy.

1. Diverse Voter Perspectives and the Transformation of Electoral Rationality

The finding that voters in Kendari City demonstrate diverse and multidimensional perspectives toward local executive candidates confirms broader scholarly arguments that voter behavior in decentralized democracies cannot be reduced to a single rationality. Classical models of rational choice and retrospective voting assume that voters evaluate candidates primarily based on performance outcomes and policy delivery (Fiorina, 1981). Evidence from Kendari partially supports this assumption, as many voters emphasized track records, public service delivery, and responsiveness as key evaluative criteria.

However, the Kendari case also reveals that performance-based evaluation coexists with relational and pragmatic considerations. This finding resonates with Allen’s (2015) argument that personal vote-seeking strategies in Indonesia remain effective because voters value accessibility and social proximity alongside policy outcomes. In a decentralized setting, where local executives are physically and socially closer to voters, personal interactions become a significant source of political legitimacy. Thus, voter rationality appears to be contextually embedded, shaped by everyday social relations rather than abstract policy platforms alone.

Furthermore, the continued tolerance of certain transactional practices – particularly those framed as social assistance or community support – suggests an adaptive form of clientelism. Rather than indicating voter ignorance or apathy, this behavior reflects what Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007) describe as “pragmatic rationality,” where voters strategically accept material benefits while maintaining normative preferences for good governance. In Kendari, voters increasingly criticize overt vote buying, yet still rationalize indirect material exchanges. This supports Berenschot’s (2019) contention that clientelism in Indonesia has not disappeared but has evolved in response to democratic institutions.

2. Public Protest and the Emergence of Critical Citizenship

One of the most significant findings of this study is the emergence of public protest and open rejection of candidates perceived as non-pro-people. This phenomenon indicates a growing level of political consciousness and aligns with theories of participatory and deliberative democracy, which emphasize active citizen engagement beyond voting (Fung, 2006). In Kendari, protests manifested through critical questioning during campaign events, social media criticism, and civil society-led public discussions.

This pattern supports the argument that decentralization can expand democratic spaces by bringing political authority closer to citizens, thereby lowering the cost of participation and dissent (Crook & Manor, 1998). Civil society organizations play a mediating role in this process by translating abstract democratic norms into locally relevant issues, such as service delivery, corruption, and elite capture. The involvement of NGOs in voter education and election monitoring in Kendari reflects what Grindle (2007) terms “good enough governance,” where incremental improvements in accountability emerge through societal pressure rather than institutional redesign alone.

However, the uneven distribution of protest behavior across social groups highlights the limits of democratic deepening under conditions of socio-economic inequality. Economically vulnerable voters often expressed dissatisfaction privately but refrained from open protest due to dependency on local networks and material support. This finding echoes Auyero’s (2001) analysis of how clientelistic relationships can constrain political expression, even as democratic institutions formally expand. In this sense, protest in Kendari represents both progress and paradox: an expanding repertoire of democratic action that remains socially stratified.

3. Dialoguing with Varied Academic Interpretations

The study's findings also help explain why academic interpretations of voter transformation under regional autonomy remain divided. Optimistic accounts emphasize increased voter awareness, issue-based evaluation, and declining tolerance for blatant money politics (Lewis, 2020). From this perspective, Kendari exemplifies a gradual maturation of local democracy, where voters increasingly hold candidates accountable for governance outcomes.

In contrast, more critical scholars caution against equating discursive change with behavioral transformation. Aspinall and Sukmajati (2016) argue that while voters may adopt the language of accountability and reform, electoral outcomes often continue to be shaped by informal networks and material incentives. The Kendari findings support this critique by demonstrating that normative preferences for pro-people leadership coexist with pragmatic acceptance of transactional politics.

Institutional perspectives—particularly those found in election management reports—tend to focus on procedural indicators such as voter turnout, regulatory compliance, and logistical improvements. While these indicators are important, they risk overlooking the socio-political dynamics shaping voter decision-making. As Norris (2014) notes, procedural integrity alone does not guarantee substantive democratic quality. The Kendari case illustrates that meaningful democratic evaluation requires attention to how voters interpret and navigate political choices within their lived realities.

By placing these perspectives in dialogue, this study advances a hybrid interpretation of voter transformation. Rather than viewing voter behavior as moving linearly from clientelism to rational-performance voting, the findings suggest a process of negotiation among competing logics. Voters simultaneously act as evaluators of performance, members of social networks, and pragmatic actors responding to material constraints. This hybrid model aligns with recent comparative studies emphasizing the contextual and non-linear nature of democratic change (Piattoni, 2001; Hickey & Mohan, 2004).

4. Implications for Regional Autonomy and Local Governance

The Kendari case has broader implications for understanding the relationship between regional autonomy and democratic accountability. Decentralization creates opportunities for closer scrutiny of local leaders, but it also provides space for local elites to adapt informal practices to new institutional settings. The transformation of voter perspectives, therefore, should be understood as an ongoing process shaped by both institutional reforms and social structures.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening local democracy requires more than procedural regulation. Voter education programs must engage with the realities of social proximity and transactional expectations, rather than assuming purely rational policy-based decision-making. Similarly, anti-money politics initiatives should address the socio-economic vulnerabilities that make pragmatic exchanges appealing to voters.

Overall, this study demonstrates that voter perspectives in Kendari City are neither static nor uniform. The diversity of voter opinions, the rise of public

protest against non-pro-people candidates, and the variation in academic interpretations all point to a dynamic and contested process of democratic transformation. Regional autonomy has altered the political landscape, but its democratic outcomes depend on how voters, civil society, and institutions interact within that landscape.

By grounding theoretical debates in empirical evidence from an urban context in Eastern Indonesia, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of local democracy. It underscores the need to move beyond binary categorizations of voters as either rational or clientelistic, and instead recognize the complex ways in which democratic norms and pragmatic considerations intersect in everyday electoral politics.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First, the key findings of this study indicate that voters' perspectives in Kendari City during the 2025-2030 local executive election period are undergoing a process of transformation rather than a linear shift. Voters no longer rely solely on party affiliation or personal loyalty, but increasingly combine performance-based evaluations, social proximity, and pragmatic considerations in assessing local executive candidates. The emergence of public protest and rejection of candidates perceived as non-pro-people further reflects growing democratic awareness and assertiveness among segments of the electorate. However, this critical engagement coexists with adaptive clientelistic practices, demonstrating that regional autonomy reshapes—rather than eliminates—the logics through which voters make political choices.

Second, the main strength of this research lies in its integrative and context-sensitive approach to understanding local electoral democracy. By combining qualitative surveys, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, the study captures both individual-level perceptions and broader institutional dynamics within Kendari's local political landscape. The inclusion of diverse informants—voters, election organizers, government officials, civil society actors, and political party representatives—enhances the analytical depth and credibility of the findings. Moreover, situating the analysis in an urban context in Eastern Indonesia contributes empirical insights to an area that remains underrepresented in the literature on decentralization and local elections.

Third, despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The qualitative design and case-study focus limit the generalizability of the findings beyond Kendari City. In addition, the reliance on self-reported perceptions may not fully capture discrepancies between expressed attitudes and actual voting behavior. Future research could address these limitations by employing comparative designs across multiple localities, integrating longitudinal data, or combining qualitative insights with quantitative electoral analysis to further examine the dynamics of voter transformation under regional autonomy.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. The qualitative design and focus of the case study limit the generalization of findings outside of Kendari City. In addition, reliance on self-reported perceptions may not fully capture the difference between expressed attitudes and voter behavior at actual voting. Future research can address these limitations by using comparative designs in wider regions, integrating longitudinal data, or combining qualitative insights with quantitative electoral analysis to further examine the dynamics of voter transformation under regional autonomy.

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