

Relationship Between Local Culture and Voter Rationality in the 2024 Electoral Contestation in Batu Bara Regency

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between local culture and voter rationality in the electoral contestation in Batu Bara Regency. The research aims to analyze how local cultural values influence the political behavior of society in determining their choices during regional head elections. As a multiethnic region predominantly shaped by coastal Malay culture, Batu Bara Regency possesses strong social characteristics rooted in kinship relations, traditional leaders, religious authority, and socio-political patronage networks. This study employs a qualitative method with approaches from political sociology and cultural anthropology. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation studies involving community members, traditional leaders, religious figures, and local political campaign teams. The findings reveal that voter rationality in Batu Bara Regency is not entirely rational-instrumental as described in modern rational choice theory, but is significantly influenced by local culture, emotional proximity, ethnic identity, patron-client relations, and the legitimacy of traditional and religious leaders. Local culture functions as a medium for the production of political meaning that shapes voter preferences in electoral contestation. In this context, voting behavior represents a combination of pragmatic considerations and cultural values embedded within society. This study confirms that local democracy in Batu Bara Regency cannot be understood solely through formal political approaches, but must also be examined through the cultural dimensions that shape public political consciousness.

KEYWORDS

Local Culture
Voter Rationality
Local Politics
Regional Elections
Batu Bara Regency

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INTRODUCTION

Local democracy in Indonesia has experienced significant development since the implementation of regional autonomy and the direct election of regional leaders. Regional head elections (Pilkada) have become one of the most important instruments for strengthening public participation in determining regional leadership democratically. Through Pilkada, society acts not only as voters but also as the primary actors who determine the direction of regional policies and development through their political choices.

In practice, voting behavior cannot always be explained solely through formal political approaches. Political choices are often influenced by various social, economic, cultural, religious, and emotional factors that develop within community life. Therefore, understanding voter behavior in the context of local democracy requires a multidisciplinary approach capable of examining the relationship between politics and culture within society.

Studies on voter rationality were initially influenced by rational choice theory, which positions individuals as actors who make decisions based on calculations of political costs and benefits. From this perspective, voters are assumed to choose candidates who are considered most capable of providing economic benefits, welfare, and favorable policies. However, in societies that still maintain strong cultural ties, voting behavior is not always individualistic and pragmatic.

In Indonesia, particularly within local communities that retain traditional social structures, political decisions are often influenced by cultural values, kinship relations, ethnic identity, religion, and group loyalty. Local politics is not merely an arena for formal power struggles but also a space where political interests intersect with the cultural values embedded in society. This condition demonstrates that culture plays a crucial role in shaping public political consciousness.

Batu Bara Regency is one of the regions in North Sumatra that possesses complex social and cultural dynamics. The people of Batu Bara Regency consist of various ethnic groups, including Malay, Javanese, Batak, Minangkabau, and several other ethnic communities. This diversity has formed distinctive patterns of social interaction that influence local political life.

As a region strongly associated with coastal Malay culture, the people of Batu Bara Regency continue to preserve traditional values, social solidarity, respect for traditional and religious leaders, and deliberative traditions in everyday life. These values are not only present in social and cultural activities but also influence how people understand and determine their political choices. In this context, local culture becomes an essential element in shaping political behavior.

Electoral contestation in the regional elections of Batu Bara Regency demonstrates the involvement of cultural elements in both candidates' political strategies and public voting behavior. Regional head candidates frequently employ local cultural symbols, customary approaches, and networks of community leaders as part of their political campaign strategies. The use of cultural identity aims to establish emotional closeness and social legitimacy within society.

In addition to the use of cultural symbols, social relations and kinship networks also play dominant roles in the political mobilization process. Political support is often formed through family relations, ethnic proximity, and the influence of certain prominent figures within society. This situation indicates that voting behavior in Batu Bara Regency is influenced not only by candidates' political programs but also by the social and cultural relationships that develop within the community.

The phenomenon of identity politics has also become a prominent aspect of the Pilkada dynamics in Batu Bara Regency. Ethnic and religious identities are frequently utilized as instruments for building political solidarity and gaining public support. Candidates who are perceived to share cultural or religious identities with certain community groups tend to receive higher levels of acceptance. This condition illustrates that cultural identity still possesses considerable political power within local democracy.

On the other hand, the development of information technology and the increasing public access to digital media have begun to influence patterns of political behavior. Some members of society, particularly younger generations, have started to demonstrate more rational political orientations by considering candidates' work programs, leadership capacity, and political track records. This transformation has created a combination of modern rationality and cultural rationality in the voting behavior of the people of Batu Bara Regency.

In this context, voter rationality cannot be understood solely through an economic-political approach. The rationality of local communities is often contextual because it is shaped by the cultural value systems they embrace. Political decisions may be considered rational according to the social and cultural values prevailing within the community, even though they may not fully align with the concept of modern political rationality.

Patronage relations also remain an important aspect of local political culture in Batu Bara Regency. Influential community figures with strong social and economic positions often act as patrons capable of mobilizing political support. These patron-client relations are built through social loyalty, emotional ties, and cultural bonds that have long existed within society. Such patronage practices demonstrate that traditional social structures continue to influence local political dynamics.

The study of the relationship between local culture and voter rationality is important because it can provide a deeper understanding of the characteristics of local democracy in Indonesia. Local politics cannot be understood solely through electoral data and formal voting behavior but must also be examined through the cultural dimensions that shape public social consciousness. Therefore, approaches from political sociology and cultural anthropology are highly relevant for understanding the political behavior of the people of Batu Bara Regency.

This study seeks to explain how local culture influences voter rationality in electoral contestation in Batu Bara Regency. The research focuses on the relationship between local cultural values, social identity, patronage relations, and community voting behavior in regional elections. In addition, this study aims to examine how society combines cultural considerations and pragmatic considerations in determining political choices. Academically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of studies in political sociology, political anthropology, and local democracy in Indonesia. Furthermore, the findings may serve as references for regional governments, academics, and election organizers in understanding the dynamics of political behavior based on local cultural values.

Based on this background, the study focuses on several research questions: how local culture influences voting behavior in Batu Bara Regency; how voter rationality is manifested in regional electoral contestation; and how the relationship between cultural identity, political patronage, and candidate strategies shapes public political support.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method with a descriptive-interpretative approach to understand the phenomenon of community political behavior within the social and cultural context of Batu Bara Regency. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on the meanings, values, and social experiences that influence people in determining their political choices during electoral contestation. Through this approach, the researcher seeks to understand how local culture shapes voter rationality and how society interprets democratic processes within their social lives.

The descriptive-interpretative approach is used to provide an in-depth description of the social realities developing within society while simultaneously interpreting the relationship between local culture and political behavior. This research does not merely aim to describe local political phenomena in general terms, but also seeks to uncover the social and cultural meanings underlying people's political actions. Thus, society is positioned as an active subject in constructing political reality based on the cultural values they uphold.

The research was conducted in several districts within Batu Bara Regency that demonstrate strong political dynamics and socio-cultural diversity, namely Lima Pulu,

Tanjung Tiram, and Talawi. These areas were selected because they represent the multiethnic social conditions of Batu Bara Regency and exhibit relatively active political participation in regional elections. Furthermore, these districts demonstrate strong interactions between local culture, social networks, and local political practices.

Lima Puluh District was selected because it serves as the administrative center of Batu Bara Regency, where political activities are relatively intensive and various social groups interact. The district demonstrates political dynamics strongly influenced by local elites, community leaders, and bureaucratic networks. Meanwhile, Tanjung Tiram District was chosen because of its coastal Malay community, which continues to preserve traditional customs and local cultural values in everyday social life. Talawi District was selected because it reflects a highly complex ethnic diversity, making it particularly relevant for examining the influence of cultural identity on community political behavior.

Data collection techniques in this study consisted of observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. These three techniques were employed simultaneously in order to obtain comprehensive data capable of describing the socio-political realities of society in depth. The use of multiple data collection methods also aimed to enhance the validity and accuracy of the information gathered during the research process.

Observation was conducted through direct examination of community political activities, social interactions among citizens, political campaign activities, and forms of public participation during the regional election period. Through observation, the researcher obtained insights into how local culture is manifested in everyday political practices. The researcher also observed patterns of political communication, the use of cultural symbols in political campaigns, and the influence of traditional and religious leaders in mobilizing political support.

In-depth interviews were conducted with various informants considered to possess knowledge and experience regarding local political dynamics in Batu Bara Regency. The research informants included traditional leaders, religious leaders, members of the general public, local academics, election organizers, and campaign teams of regional head candidates. Interviews were conducted openly and comprehensively in order to gain an understanding of public perspectives on local politics, political culture, voter rationality, and the influence of cultural identity in regional elections.

In addition to observation and interviews, this study also utilized documentation techniques to complement the research data. Documentation involved collecting various written sources such as regional election archives, election result data, mass media reports, photographs of campaign activities, regional policy documents, and literature related to the political culture of the Batu Bara community. These documents served as supporting sources to strengthen the research analysis.

Data analysis was carried out in several stages, including data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. During the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and categorized data based on the research focus related to local culture, voter rationality, identity politics, and political patronage relations. Subsequently, the categorized data were systematically presented to facilitate interpretation and the extraction of meaning from the social phenomena identified in the field.

In the analytical process, the researcher employed perspectives from political sociology and cultural anthropology to understand the relationship between local culture and community political behavior. The political sociology perspective was used to examine how power, social networks, and political relations operate within local society, while the cultural anthropology approach was applied to understand the values, symbols, and cultural practices

influencing voter behavior. Through these approaches, the study is expected to produce a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between local culture and voter rationality in electoral contestation in Batu Bara Regency.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Local Culture as the Foundation of Political Behavior

The people of Batu Bara Regency possess social characteristics that remain strongly influenced by local cultural values, particularly the coastal Malay culture that continues to shape everyday community life. These cultural values are not only reflected in customary practices and traditions, but also influence patterns of social interaction, deliberative processes, and political decision-making mechanisms. Within community life, kinship relations and social solidarity remain the primary foundations for building trust in individuals, including in determining political choices during regional elections (Pilkada).

Local culture in Batu Bara Regency demonstrates a collective orientation in social life. Political decisions are often not made individually, but rather through considerations involving social groups such as extended families, customary communities, religious leaders, and surrounding social environments. The tradition of deliberation (*musyawarah*) remains an important aspect in determining political support, especially in rural areas where social ties remain strong. This condition indicates that community political behavior cannot be separated from the cultural structures that continue to live and develop across generations.

In the context of regional elections, traditional leaders occupy a strategic position in shaping public political opinion. Traditional leaders are regarded as figures possessing moral authority and social legitimacy because they are considered to understand traditional values and maintain social harmony within society. Support expressed by traditional leaders toward particular candidates is often interpreted by the community as a form of moral recommendation worthy of following. This demonstrates that symbolic power rooted in local culture continues to exert a strong influence on voting behavior.

In addition to traditional leaders, religious leaders also play a significant role in local political dynamics in Batu Bara Regency. Religious communities tend to regard the views of religious figures as important references in determining political choices. Candidates who maintain close relationships with Islamic scholars, actively participate in religious activities, and possess a religious public image generally gain higher levels of public trust. In this context, religion and culture intersect in forming socio-political legitimacy that influences voter preferences.

This phenomenon indicates that the political rationality of the people of Batu Bara Regency cannot be understood solely through a rational-instrumental approach oriented toward economic benefits or candidate programs. Voter rationality within the context of local culture is more socio-cultural in nature, where moral considerations, emotional relationships, and group loyalty become important aspects of political decision-making. In other words, people tend to support candidates who are perceived as capable of preserving the social and cultural values embraced by society.

The use of Malay cultural symbols in political campaigns also constitutes a dominant strategy in electoral contestation within Batu Bara Regency. These cultural symbols are reflected through the use of the Malay language in political speeches, the wearing of traditional Malay attire, the organization of campaign events with local cultural themes, and the use of slogans emphasizing regional identity. Such strategies are intended to create emotional closeness between candidates and society, thereby positioning candidates as part of the collective identity of the Batu Bara community.

Cultural symbols in political campaigns function not only as tools of political communication but also as media for constructing social legitimacy. Candidates who are capable of presenting themselves as figures who understand local customs and traditions tend to be more easily accepted by society. Conversely, candidates perceived as distant from local cultural values are often regarded as less capable of understanding community social needs. In this context, local culture becomes an important arena for constructing candidates' political images in the eyes of voters.

On the other hand, patronage relations remain an integral aspect of local political culture in Batu Bara Regency. Relationships between community leaders, political elites, and voter groups form patterns of political support that are social and emotional in nature. Influential figures with strong social standing are often capable of directing public political preferences through kinship ties, social assistance, and personal closeness. This condition demonstrates that traditional social structures continue to influence the practice of local democracy.

Nevertheless, the people of Batu Bara Regency do not make political choices solely based on cultural factors and emotional proximity. Some segments of society have begun to consider rational aspects such as candidates' work programs, leadership experience, economic capability, and political track records. This transformation is particularly visible among younger voters and urban communities who possess broader access to information through social media and developments in communication technology. Consequently, a combination of modern rationality and cultural rationality can be observed in community political behavior.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be understood that local culture occupies a highly significant position in shaping the political behavior of the people of Batu Bara Regency. Culture serves not only as a social identity but also as an instrument influencing political preferences, the legitimacy of power, and patterns of local political communication. Therefore, local democracy in Batu Bara Regency must be understood as a political process inseparable from the cultural dynamics of its society. In this context, local culture constitutes the primary foundation for understanding how society constructs political rationality within electoral contestation.

Voter Rationality from a Socio-Cultural Perspective

Voter rationality in electoral contestation within Batu Bara Regency demonstrates characteristics that differ from the concept of modern political rationality, which primarily emphasizes considerations of policy programs, economic benefits, or the effectiveness of candidates' policies. In the context of Batu Bara society, voting behavior is strongly influenced by social relations and cultural values embedded within community life. Political choices are not formed individually but are shaped by social environments, emotional relationships, and collective value systems that develop within everyday social interactions.

One of the most important factors influencing voter rationality is kinship relations. In Batu Bara society, where family ties remain strong, political choices often follow the direction of support expressed by extended family members or respected figures within family networks. Genealogical closeness becomes the basis for political solidarity, causing candidates with family connections or personal proximity to society to receive stronger support. This demonstrates that political decisions cannot be separated from the dominant kinship-based social structure.

In addition to family relations, ethnic similarity also influences public political preferences. As a multiethnic region, Batu Bara Regency demonstrates patterns of political support formed around certain cultural identities. Shared ethnic identity creates

psychological closeness and group solidarity that influence public trust toward candidates. Candidates perceived as belonging to the same cultural group are often viewed as better able to understand the social needs and aspirations of local communities.

Religious proximity also constitutes an important consideration in voter rationality within Batu Bara society. Religious communities tend to support candidates who possess strong moral and religious reputations. Candidates' involvement in socio-religious activities, relationships with religious leaders, and commitment to maintaining religious values become important aspects of public political considerations. Under these conditions, religion functions not only as a spiritual identity but also as a source of social legitimacy in building political trust.

Beyond social and cultural identity factors, society also considers candidates' social contributions to local communities. Candidates who actively assist society, participate in social activities, and demonstrate concern for local community welfare tend to gain greater public sympathy. Such contributions are interpreted as evidence of emotional closeness and social responsibility toward the region. Thus, voter rationality in Batu Bara Regency is also closely related to society's direct social experiences with political candidates.

From a socio-cultural perspective, voter rationality in Batu Bara Regency is contextual and collective in nature. Community political choices should not be regarded as irrational actions, but rather as forms of rationality grounded in the cultural value systems embraced by society. Voting decisions become part of efforts to maintain social harmony, group solidarity, and the continuity of local cultural values. Therefore, the political behavior of Batu Bara society must be understood as a combination of pragmatic considerations and cultural values that shape public social consciousness in electoral contestation.

Identity Politics and Electoral Contestation

Identity politics has become one of the dominant phenomena in the dynamics of regional elections in Batu Bara Regency. In the process of electoral contestation, ethnic, religious, and cultural identities are frequently employed as political instruments to build public support. Political candidates attempt to demonstrate identity closeness with particular groups in order to gain social and emotional legitimacy from voters. This condition indicates that cultural identity still possesses substantial power in shaping political orientations at the local level.

As a multiethnic society, Batu Bara Regency demonstrates complex dynamics of identity politics. The presence of Malay, Javanese, Batak, Minangkabau, and other ethnic communities creates diverse patterns of social interaction within political life. During regional elections, ethnic identity is often utilized as a means of strengthening group solidarity and constructing political support bases. Candidates typically seek to establish closeness with certain cultural communities through language, customary symbols, and networks of local community leaders.

The use of cultural identity in local politics can be observed through various campaign strategies. Candidates frequently attend traditional ceremonies, wear traditional clothing, and incorporate local cultural narratives into political speeches. These symbols are employed to create the impression that candidates are part of the community and understand local cultural values. Such strategies are considered effective because the people of Batu Bara Regency continue to maintain emotional attachment to inherited cultural identities.

In addition to ethnic identity, religion also constitutes an important element in identity politics within Batu Bara Regency. Candidates possessing religious public images or receiving support from particular religious leaders tend to gain stronger public trust. In many

cases, religious legitimacy is perceived as an indicator of morality and leadership quality. Consequently, religious activities frequently become part of political strategies designed to construct positive public images within religious communities.

Despite the prominence of identity politics, the people of Batu Bara Regency do not determine political choices solely based on primordial identity factors. Some voters have begun to consider rational aspects such as candidates' competence, leadership experience, social track records, and policy programs. This demonstrates transformations in political behavior patterns, particularly among younger voters and communities with broader access to digital information.

The development of social media and information technology has also influenced how society understands local politics. Voters no longer rely exclusively on information provided by traditional leaders or social groups, but also obtain political information through online media, political news, and digital discussion spaces. As a result, segments of society have become more critical toward candidates and are no longer entirely dependent on cultural identity as the primary basis for political choice.

Thus, the voting behavior of Batu Bara society demonstrates a combination of pragmatic rationality and cultural rationality. Voters continue to consider social identity and cultural closeness, while simultaneously evaluating candidates' capacities to govern the region effectively. This combination reflects a transitional process in political culture from traditional patterns toward more rational and modern political orientations, although local cultural values continue to maintain strong influence.

Within local political dynamics in Batu Bara Regency, patron-client relations also remain an important aspect of electoral contestation. Community leaders possessing social, economic, or cultural influence often function as patrons capable of directing the political choices of particular groups. Such influence is constructed through social closeness, economic assistance, and group loyalty that have developed within everyday community life.

Patronage practices in local politics usually operate through informal networks involving traditional leaders, religious leaders, village elites, and extended family groups. Patrons possess the ability to mobilize political support because society continues to regard social relations and loyalty as important values within collective life. In this context, political support is often understood as part of reciprocal relationships between leaders and society that have developed over long periods.

The phenomenon of patronage cannot be separated from the social structure of Batu Bara society, which continues to value hierarchical relations and group solidarity. Local culture becomes a source of legitimacy for patronage politics because society perceives certain figures as worthy of respect and obedience. Therefore, local democracy in Batu Bara Regency operates not only within formal political systems but is also influenced by cultural relations, social networks, and traditional power structures embedded within society.

Patronage Relations and Local Political Culture

Patronage relations remain an important aspect of local political dynamics in Batu Bara Regency. Patron-client relationships develop through social bonds formed within community life, whether based on kinship ties, economic relations, or the social influence of particular figures. In the context of regional elections (Pilkada), individuals possessing strong social influence are generally able to build and direct political support through networks that have been established across generations. This condition indicates that local political culture continues to be shaped by traditional social relationships that position

certain figures as centers of public loyalty.

Community leaders, traditional leaders, religious figures, and local elites occupy strategic positions as patrons within the social structure of Batu Bara society. They are regarded not only as informal leaders but also as individuals possessing moral authority and strong social influence. Political support expressed by these figures often affects public political choices, particularly among rural communities that maintain close social relationships. In such circumstances, political decisions are not entirely individual in nature, but are influenced by the guidance and recommendations of respected leaders.

Patronage practices in local politics generally operate through reciprocal relationships between patrons and society as clients. Patrons provide social assistance, economic access, social protection, or administrative support to communities, while society offers political loyalty in return as a form of social reciprocity. These relationships create strong emotional attachments and forms of dependency within local political life. Consequently, patronage is understood not merely as a pragmatic political practice, but also as part of deeply rooted social relations embedded in community culture.

Within the context of local political culture, group loyalty remains an important value upheld by the people of Batu Bara Regency. Society tends to preserve harmonious social relationships with influential figures within their social environment. Respect toward leaders, the maintenance of group solidarity, and the preservation of kinship relations strengthen the persistence of political patronage practices. Therefore, public political choices are often shaped by social and cultural considerations aimed at maintaining stability within community relationships.

On the other hand, democratic development and increasing openness of information have begun to influence patterns of political patronage in Batu Bara Regency. Some members of society, particularly younger generations and educated groups, have started to demonstrate more critical attitudes toward patron-client political practices. They no longer rely entirely on the direction of particular figures, but increasingly consider candidates' capacities, work programs, and leadership track records when determining political choices. This transformation reflects a gradual shift in political culture from traditional patterns toward more rational forms of political participation.

Nevertheless, patronage practices continue to exert considerable influence within the local political dynamics of Batu Bara Regency. The social structure of society, which still values hierarchical relationships and group loyalty, enables patronage to persist as an integral part of local political culture. In this context, local culture functions as a source of legitimacy for patronage politics because society perceives social relationships and emotional closeness as essential elements of political life. Therefore, understanding local politics in Batu Bara Regency requires consideration of cultural dimensions as fundamental factors shaping community political behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that local culture has a strong relationship with voter rationality in electoral contestation in Batu Bara Regency. Community voting behavior is influenced not only by modern rational considerations such as political programs and political benefits, but also by cultural values, social solidarity, ethnic identity, and the legitimacy of traditional and religious leaders. Voter rationality in Batu Bara Regency is contextual and socio-cultural in nature. Voters make political decisions based on the value systems embedded within their communities. In this context, local democracy cannot be understood solely through formal political approaches, but must also be viewed as part of the broader cultural dynamics of society.

This study confirms that local culture remains an important force in shaping community political behavior in the era of modern democracy. Therefore, studies of local politics in Indonesia need to pay greater attention to cultural dimensions as fundamental factors in understanding the electoral dynamics of society.

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