

**THE PHENOMENON OF MONEY POLITICS IN VILLAGE HEAD ELECTIONS
IN INDONESIA: AN ANALYSIS OF CAUSES, IMPACTS, AND CHALLENGES**

**FENOMENA POLITIK UANG DALAM PEMILIHAN KEPALA DESA DI
INDONESIA: ANALISIS PENYEBAB, DAMPAK, DAN TANTANGAN**

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of money politics in village head elections is still a serious challenge to the quality of local democracy in Indonesia. Although the election of village heads is carried out on the principles of direct, public, free, secret, honest, and fair, the practice of money-based political transactions is still rampant and even considered reasonable by some people. This study aims to analyze the causes of money politics, its influence on voting behavior, and challenges in efforts to prevent it. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach by involving 50 student respondents who have experience following or directly observing the practice of money politics in the election of village heads in their respective home areas. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using an interactive model that included the process of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawn. The results of the study show that the practice of money politics is influenced by three main factors, namely pragmatic political culture, low economic conditions of the community, and weak supervision and political awareness of citizens. Money is seen as a form of attention for village head candidates and is the main consideration in determining political choices. Money politics has been shown to influence voting behavior, lower voter rationality, and weaken the integrity of local democracy. In the long run, this practice creates a community's dependence on political elites and hampers the accountability of village government. This research recommends improving political education for the community and the younger generation, strengthening the independence of election supervisory institutions, and prevention strategies based on local culture to build awareness that rejecting money politics is a fundamental step towards democracy with integrity.

Keywords: Money Politics, Village Head Election, Voting Behavior, Political Culture, Local Democracy.

ABSTRAK

Fenomena politik uang dalam pemilihan kepala desa masih menjadi tantangan serius bagi kualitas demokrasi lokal di Indonesia. Meskipun pemilihan kepala desa dilaksanakan berdasarkan prinsip-prinsip langsung, umum, bebas, rahasia, jujur, dan adil, praktik transaksi politik berbasis uang masih marak dan bahkan dianggap wajar oleh sebagian orang. Studi ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penyebab politik uang, pengaruhnya terhadap perilaku pemilih, serta tantangan dalam upaya pencegahan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan melibatkan 50 responden mahasiswa yang memiliki pengalaman mengikuti atau secara langsung mengamati praktik politik uang dalam pemilihan kepala desa di daerah asal masing-masing. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif yang mencakup proses reduksi data, penyajian data, dan kesimpulan yang ditarik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa praktik politik uang dipengaruhi oleh tiga faktor utama, yaitu budaya politik pragmatis, kondisi ekonomi masyarakat yang rendah, dan pengawasan yang lemah serta kesadaran politik warga yang rendah. Uang dianggap sebagai bentuk perhatian bagi calon kepala desa dan menjadi pertimbangan utama dalam menentukan pilihan politik. Politik uang terbukti mempengaruhi perilaku pemilih, menurunkan rasionalitas pemilih, dan melemahkan integritas demokrasi lokal. Dalam jangka panjang, praktik ini menciptakan ketergantungan masyarakat pada elit politik dan menghambat akuntabilitas pemerintah desa. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan peningkatan pendidikan politik bagi masyarakat dan generasi muda, penguatan kemandirian lembaga pengawasan pemilu, serta strategi pencegahan berdasarkan budaya lokal untuk membangun kesadaran bahwa menolak politik uang adalah langkah fundamental menuju demokrasi yang berintegritas.

Kata Kunci: Politik Uang, Pemilihan Kepala Desa, Perilaku Pemilih, Budaya Politik, Demokrasi Lokal.

INTRODUCTION

Money politics is a form of democratic pathology that is still firmly rooted in electoral politics practice in Indonesia. This term refers to the act of giving money, goods, or certain facilities by a successful candidate or team to voters with the aim of gaining votes. According to Schaffer (2007), money politics is a form of *vote buying* that reflects the weak integrity of elections and the low rationality of voters in determining political choices. This practice not only hurts the principles of honesty and fairness in elections, but also erodes the essence of democracy that is oriented towards ideas, integrity, and leadership capacity (Indra & Khoirunurrofik, 2022); (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019).

In Indonesia, money politics has become a recurring phenomenon in every electoral contest, both at the national, regional, and village levels. Aspinall and Sukmajati (2015) emphasized that money politics has become part of a political patronage system that connects elites and society through material transactions (Adlin et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Berenschot (2018) added that this phenomenon arises from a combination of people's economic needs and political culture that is still pragmatic. In rural contexts, money politics is often seen as an "aid" or a "token of gratitude," not as a violation of democratic ethics. This view shows that the practice of money politics has been *socially embedded*, making it difficult to eradicate only through legal regulation (Sampe, 2015). Normatively, Law Number 6 of 2014 concerning Villages and its derivative regulations have affirmed the importance of local democracy through a direct, public, free, and secret mechanism for the election of village heads (Pilkades). However, the

reality on the ground shows that the Regional Elections are often an arena for massive money politics. Tjahjono's (2020) study shows that the election of village heads in many regions is colored by systematic vote buying, both in the form of cash, basic necessities, and project promises after being elected. Economic factors, low levels of political education, and weak supervision are the main causes of the flourishing of this practice (Asnur et al., 2024; Ichsan et al., 2023).

From the perspective of political behavior, Hicken (2011) explains that money politics is closely related to *rational choice* theory, where voters act to maximize personal gain. In weak economic conditions, material offers are a strong incentive for voters to exchange their voting rights. This is in line with the findings of Nichter (2014) who stated that money politics is often seen by voters as "compensation" for the uncertainty of the benefits of elected candidates in the future. Thus, voting behavior is colored by pragmatic logic, not ideological or programmatic considerations (Ash-Shidiqqi & Wibisono, 2018).

Meanwhile, from the dimension of political culture, Liddle and Mujani (2007) stated that Indonesian society still shows a pattern of patrimonial and paternalistic political culture, where loyalty to figures is stronger than commitment to democratic values. In the context of the village, patron-client social relations reinforce this tendency (Aspinall et al., 2017). Candidates with large economic resources play the role of *patrons* who provide assistance or money, while citizens become *clients* who feel indebted. This relationship creates a sustained cycle of dependency and inhibits the growth of critical political

awareness. In addition to having an impact on the electoral process, money politics also has serious implications for village governance. Hadiz and Robison (2013) emphasized that the practice of patronage and transactional politics at the local level often results in leaders who are not oriented to public services, but to the interests of support groups. As a result, village development tends to be ineffective, and public budgets are prone to being misappropriated for the sake of political revenge. This condition reinforces the conclusion that money politics not only hurts the morality of democracy, but also weakens accountable and transparent governance (Aspinall, 2011).

Based on this description, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of money politics in the election of village heads is the result of an interaction between economic factors, pragmatic political culture, and weak law enforcement. This phenomenon is a serious challenge in realizing local democracy with integrity (Yandri, 2017; Aspinall & As'Ad, 2015). Therefore, this study aims to analyze the causes of money politics in the election of village heads, identify its impact on people's voting behavior, and examine the challenges faced in efforts to prevent it. The results of this research are expected to contribute to strengthening the political literacy of villagers and reforming the supervisory system of village head elections in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand the phenomenon of money politics in the election of village heads from the perspective of village communities. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the purpose of the research that seeks to explore people's

experiences, views, and attitudes towards the practice of money politics and its impact on voting behavior and local democratic dynamics. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on the social meaning that results from the interaction between individuals and their environment.

This study involved 50 student respondents who had experience in following or directly observing the practice of money politics in the election of village heads in their respective areas of origin. The selection of informants was carried out by purposive sampling, which is based on the consideration that they understand the social and political context in their environment (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This case study highlights how money politics is practiced and perceived by the community in the context of village head elections (Pilkades). As explained by Yin (2018), case studies are used to uncover in depth complex phenomena in real-life contexts. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, using question guides that focused on three main aspects, namely the causes of money politics, the influence of money politics on voting behavior, and challenges in preventing it. The semi-structured interview technique was chosen because it allowed researchers to explore informant answers flexibly and in-depth (Kvale, 2007). Secondary data were collected from literature, laws and regulations (Law No. 6 of 2014 on Villages), as well as the results of previous research such as Aspinall & Sukmajati (2015) and Tjahjono (2020) which highlighted the practice of money politics at the local level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Money Politics as a Social Phenomenon and Local Political Culture

The phenomenon of money politics in village head elections cannot be understood solely as a deviation from democratic norms, but rather as a complex social and cultural political phenomenon. Money politics reflects the way society understands the relationship between power, economics, and social obligations. In this context, money politics functions not only as a tool to influence political choices, but also as a social mechanism that regulates the relationship between leaders and citizens. The interview results show that most respondents view the practice of money politics as “normal” or even “understandable.” Respondents stated, “it's okay as long as the money is used properly,” and “it's fine as long as it doesn't break the law.” These statements illustrate the internalization of pragmatic values in local political life. Money is seen as a form of attention or social compensation from candidates to voters, not as a violation of democratic ethics (Wibowo et al., 2024).

This phenomenon indicates that money politics has become embedded in the value system and social norms of the community. In many villages, the giving of money ahead of elections is often considered part of “political custom,” a practice interpreted as reciprocity in social relationships. Candidates who give money are considered to have empathy and concern for the community, while those who do not give are considered stingy and unfit to be leaders. In this social logic, money politics is not seen as bribery, but as a form of concern (social gift) that strengthens solidarity between candidates and the community. According to Almond and Verba (2008), this form of political culture describes a society with subjective and parochial characteristics, where political relationships are personal and emotional, rather than based on policy rationality. In

such societies, political decisions are not determined by ideological values, but by the social and economic values inherent in personal relationships (Fратиwi et al., 2025). Therefore, money politics is considered normal because it functions as a medium for maintaining patronage and social hierarchy. In the context of village head elections, this political culture creates a reciprocal circulation between patrons and clients. Village heads or candidates with economic capital act as patrons who provide assistance, while residents act as clients who exchange political support for economic resources. This pattern shows that money politics is a manifestation of the local clientelism system, which is a form of social relationship based on the exchange of benefits, rather than on the principles of participation and public responsibility.

Research by Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) confirms that the practice of money politics in Indonesia often stems from a patronage system that is deeply rooted at various levels of society. This relationship is not only transactional in an economic context, but also symbolic. The giving of money is perceived as a “sign of gratitude,” “transportation costs,” or “a sign of acquaintance,” which is then responded to by the community with political loyalty. Thus, money politics functions as a social language that is collectively understood and justified through established cultural values. Furthermore, this phenomenon shows that money politics has blurred the line between public morality and personal social relationships. The community no longer clearly distinguishes between “political assistance” and “electoral bribery.” Money is considered legitimate as long as it is given politely and does not cause open conflict. This shows moral ambiguity in the political culture of

villages, where actions that are legally wrong can be considered socially acceptable (Sarifudin & Faozi, 2024).

This condition is reinforced by the hierarchical social and economic structure of rural areas. Village head candidates who have wealth or high social status are often considered worthy of giving and deserving of winning. In many cases, giving money is not seen as a form of manipulation, but as proof of the candidate's financial ability, which is considered to bring progress to the village. This perception is in line with the findings of Hadiz and Robison (2013), who state that local power in Indonesia is often justified through economic capability and patronage, rather than through moral or ideological legitimacy. From a sociological perspective, money politics also plays a role in perpetuating social inequality in rural communities. Residents who receive money become part of a support system that maintains the dominance of the local elite. As a result, the political process no longer functions as a mechanism for the fair distribution of power, but rather as a means of reproducing capital-based power. In the long term, this creates a cycle of dependency: the poor remain recipients of aid while the political elite continue to hold control through the provision of material goods (Ananda, 2025).

This type of political culture has serious implications for the quality of local democracy. First, political participation becomes passive and pragmatic; people vote not out of political awareness, but because of the short-term benefits they receive. Second, the ideal values of democracy, such as honesty, transparency, and public accountability, are increasingly eroded by economic orientation. Third, money politics gives rise to pseudo-democracy, where the electoral process is formally

democratic, but in substance is transactional. This phenomenon shows that eradicating money politics cannot be done through law enforcement alone. (Halida et al., 2022) A cultural and educational approach targeting the social roots of this practice is needed. Political education must be directed at forming a new awareness that politics is not a space for transactions, but a space for public service. In this context, the role of the younger generation and educational institutions becomes very strategic. The students who were respondents in this study, for example, showed a critical awareness that the practice of money politics stems from low political literacy and weak public morality. Therefore, money politics must be understood as a social phenomenon that exists in everyday society, not merely a technical violation in the electoral process. Efforts to change this require a transformation of values, improved welfare, and the formation of a political culture oriented towards justice and integrity. Without this, local democracy will continue to run on a fragile foundation, where the people's votes can be bought and leadership is determined not by quality, but by economic power.

Voter Economic Rationality and Logic of Political Transactions

The phenomenon of money politics in the election of village heads cannot be separated from the way the community interprets the relationship between economy and power. For most voters at the village level, political decisions often do not rely on ideological considerations or public morality, but on economic rationality, which is a way of thinking that puts money as the main consideration factor in choosing a candidate for a leader (Andi Muhammad Alif Ranggong et al., 2023). The results of interviews with fifty student

respondents who had experience participating in the election of village heads in their home areas showed that material incentives, both in the form of cash and goods assistance, played a significant role in influencing voters' preferences. Most respondents admitted that in practice in society, the decision to vote is often determined by the nominal amount of money received. As expressed by several respondents, "if one gives IDR 50,000 and the other IDR 150,000, of course 150 thousand will be chosen." This kind of statement clearly illustrates how economic value replaces political value in the decision-making process (Suyono et al., 2021).

This finding is in line with the rational choice theory framework put forward by Downs (1957). This theory assumes that individuals act rationally to maximize utility or personal gain in any political decision. In the context of village head elections, the provision of money is considered a concrete direct benefit, while political promises or development programs are considered abstract and uncertain. Thus, choosing a candidate who gives more money is seen as the "most rational" decision in limited economic conditions. In rural communities, economic factors are one of the important determinants of political behavior. Many residents depend on informal work, subsistence farming, or social assistance. In such a situation, the money given by the village head candidate is considered as legitimate sustenance or social assistance, not as a bribe. This phenomenon shows that money politics is not only a transactional practice, but also a survival strategy in the midst of economic uncertainty. As explained by Nichter (2014), money politics in society develops not because of political ignorance, but because voters respond to economic and social

structures that do not guarantee their welfare.

Sociologically, the behavior of these voters can also be understood as a form of adaptation to structural poverty. When access to economic resources is limited and the state's presence is felt to be weak, money from a prospective village head becomes a real symbol of concern (Junaedi et al., 2023). Voters then interpreted the giving of money as a form of concern, not manipulation. This is in line with the findings of Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) that the practice of vote buying in Indonesia is often socially accepted because it is seen as a form of informal redistribution from the rich to the poor. However, this economic rationality has serious consequences for the quality of local democracy. First, political decisions based on material value tend to be short-term. Voters do not consider the candidate's capacity to manage village government, but rather on the direct benefits they derive during elections. As a result, candidates with high integrity but minimal economic capital are often eliminated by candidates with great financial ability.

Second, this economic rationality creates a cycle of political dependence. People who are used to receiving money in every political contest will continue to expect the same thing in the next election. In the long run, this condition fosters a clientelistic political culture, in which the relationship between citizens and leaders is based on material exchanges, rather than on social contracts based on trust and accountability.

Third, the practice of money politics rooted in economic rationality leads to moral degradation and political participation. The values of honesty, idealism, and citizens' responsibility for village development are eroded by pragmatic interests. In the long run,

money politics gave birth to formal democracy that lost its substance, a system in which political participation was carried out not to fight for the public interest, but to gain personal gain. In addition, from the perspective of patron-client theory, the behavior of choosing based on money also shows how the economic relationship between the elite and society is organized in the form of patronage. Candidates who give money are considered generous patrons, while voters become clients who show loyalty in return. This relationship is vertical and relies on gratitude or "debt," not the equality of citizens. This kind of relationship reinforces hierarchical local power structures, while at the same time inhibiting the emergence of autonomous political participation (Bebbington et al., 2004)

The phenomenon of economic rationality in voter behavior also shows the existence of moral tension among the community. Some respondents realized that the practice of money politics was not right, but still accepted it for reasons of need. They declare, "rather than get nothing, it's better to just accept it," but insist that the choice in the voting booth remains based on conscience. Statements like this show the ambiguity between morality and economic reality, where people try to negotiate their ethical positions in limited social situations. This condition shows that money politics is not only a matter of legal deviations, but a reflection of an unequal socio-economic structure. As people's economic well-being increases, dependence on material incentives in politics tends to decrease. On the contrary, in societies with low incomes and limited economic access, money becomes a symbol of power as well as a mechanism to measure social attention and closeness between candidates and citizens.

Thus, the phenomenon of economic rationality in money politics illustrates that local democracy still operates within the framework of economic transactions and patronal relations, not within the framework of political values and visions. To free society from this cycle, it is necessary to transform political culture through political education oriented towards critical awareness. The education must be able to foster an understanding that political decisions are not just economic affairs, but moral and social responsibilities that determine the future direction of the village. As emphasized by Liddle and Mujani (2007), rational political behavior can only grow substantially if citizens have high political awareness and access to correct information. Therefore, building a local democracy with integrity requires systematic efforts to improve welfare, expand political education, and strengthen the accountability of leaders. Without these efforts, money politics will continue to be a rational choice for poor and disillusioned people with a political system that is incapable of meeting their basic needs (Suyono et al., 2021).

Political Patronage and Power Inequality at the Village Level

The phenomenon of money politics in the election of village heads cannot be separated from the pattern of political patronage relations that are firmly rooted in rural social structures. Money politics is not just an individual's pragmatic act to gain votes, but a manifestation of a hierarchical and interdependent system of power relations between local elites and society. In this system, local leaders or village head candidates play the role of *patrons* who have economic and social resources, while residents play the role of *clients*

who provide political support as a form of reciprocity. The findings of the interviews show how this pattern of patronage works subtly in the social dynamics of the village. Some respondents said that people often feel "uncomfortable" or "inappropriate" to reject gifts from village head candidates, especially if the candidate has family relationships, kinship, or high social status in their neighborhood. Respondent D, for example, said that "the dawn attack fooled our own people, but the villagers felt bad if they didn't choose the one who had already given." This expression indicates the existence of social pressure derived from reciprocity norms in local culture (Yandri, 2017).

In the socio-political context of Indonesia, this kind of patron-client relationship is not new. Aspinall and Sukmajati (2015) and Berenschot (2018) emphasized that patronage has become the main mechanism in the local political process in Indonesia. Patronage creates a system of repetitive exchanges between political elites and society, in which public resources (such as social assistance, projects, or village funds) are used as a tool to build political loyalty. At the village level, these relationships are strengthened by emotional closeness and personal social networks, making political relationships difficult to distinguish from everyday social relationships.

This phenomenon shows that money politics is part of the moral economy of power. Local elites use their wealth to build a benevolent image and care for the community, while the community reciprocates it with political support. In this way, patronage is not only a tool for winning elections, but also an instrument for maintaining social dominance. As explained by Hadiz and Robison (2013), the local power structure in Indonesia tends to be

oligarchic, where elites who have economic capital are able to convert their wealth into political power and then maintain that power through a resource distribution mechanism (Fratiwi et al., 2025).

The patron-client relationship born from the practice of money politics also gives birth to systematic power inequality. Candidates with large economic resources have a much higher chance of winning than candidates with limited financial ability. Respondents affirmed, "if the nominal is large, more people will vote for him," indicating that the ability to buy votes is the main determinant of political victory. This condition results in what Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) call *money-based electoral competition* where political competition is no longer determined by ideas or programs, but by financial power. This inequality does not only occur in the election process, but also continues after the village head is elected. Village heads who gain power through the practice of patronage tend to manage the government with a clientelist governance pattern, which is a government that is run based on patron-client relationships. In this system, public policy is often directed to provide benefits to political support groups as a form of reciprocity. Development projects, social assistance, and even positions in village government structures are often distributed based on political loyalty, not competence (Utomo et al., 2023; Winiasri et al., 2023; Youna Chatrine Bachtiar et al., 2023; Zulyusri, 2023).

As a result, village governance becomes non-inclusive and full of personal interests. Citizens who do not support elected candidates often feel marginalized in access to government assistance or development participation. This condition reinforces social and

political fragmentation at the village level, where communities are divided into support and opposition groups, no longer communities united for common interests. From the perspective of the theory of patronage and clientelism, these conditions show the existence of an asymmetry of power between the elite and the citizenry. The political elite holds control of economic and social resources, while society is in a subordinate position dependent on the good of patrons (Halida et al., 2022). In the long run, this dependence creates a paternalistic political culture that inhibits the growth of independent and rational political participation. People no longer demand accountability, because their political relations are based on personal loyalty, not on the social contract of citizens.

This phenomenon also shows the dilemma of democracy at the local level. On the one hand, the election of the village head provides a space for the community to participate directly; But on the other hand, the practice of patronage makes democracy lose substance. Voters no longer act as autonomous citizens, but rather as clients bound in a network of social obligations. Democracy that should function as a mechanism to limit power has instead turned into a tool to strengthen the dominance of local elites.

In this context, money politics becomes an instrument of power reproduction. Local elites used economic capital to buy political legitimacy, and once in power, they used those positions to expand wealth and new patronage networks. This cycle is constantly repeated, resulting in a democracy that is procedural, but substantially relies on an economy of exchange and personal loyalty. However, not all patron-client relationships are negative. In some contexts, this relationship can serve as a

mechanism of social solidarity in the midst of the weak role of the state. Patronage is sometimes seen as a way for people to access resources that are not formally available. However, when these relationships are manipulated for political gain and at the expense of the principle of justice, patronage turns into a form of destructive clientelism that hinders democratization and sustainable village development (Andi Muhammad Alif Ranggong et al., 2023)

Therefore, understanding the politics of money through the perspective of patronage opens space for a more structural and cultural approach to its prevention. Efforts to eradicate money politics are not enough only through legal sanctions but must be accompanied by social and economic reforms at the village level. Improving community welfare, transparency in village fund management, and community-based political education are key steps to reduce citizens' dependence on local patrons. When society has greater economic independence and political awareness, bargaining power against political elites will increase, and patronage practices can be gradually reduced. Thus, political patronage in the election of village heads is not only a symptom of political irregularities, but a mirror of deeper social and economic inequality. Money politics serves as a tool to maintain an unequal power structure, where economic wealth and social status determine political legitimacy. As long as this gap is left unchecked, local democracy will continue to run on fragile foundations, a democracy that lives on in its form, but loses its soul.

The Impact of Money Politics on Village Governance and Development

Money politics in the election of village heads does not stop as a mere

electoral phenomenon, but has a long-term impact on governance and village development. After the election process ends, the transactional relationship formed between candidates and voters will continue to live on in the form of unbalanced power relations, affecting the way village heads exercise their leadership and how public resources are distributed.

The results of interviews with the respondents showed that the practice of money politics at the village level tends to give birth to a pattern of government that is oriented towards reciprocity. Respondents mentioned that "the winner usually prioritizes reciprocity," while another respondent added that "the funds run out, the village does not progress." This statement shows that village chiefs who gain power through vote-buying will feel a moral obligation to return "political investment" to their supporters. In this context, the position of the village head is no longer as a public servant, but as a manager of the patronage network that must be maintained through the distribution of resources.

This practice reinforces so-called clientelist governance, which is a governance pattern based on patron-client relationships. According to Aspinall and Sukmajati (2015), clientelist governance makes public policies no longer designed based on the needs of the wider community, but directed to maintain political loyalty. At the village level, this is reflected in the often non-transparent allocation of village funds, and in the distribution of social assistance based on political proximity, rather than objective needs (Suyono et al., 2021). In this kind of system, development decisions become exclusive and politically biased. Village projects such as infrastructure development, farmer group assistance,

or community training tend to be given to groups that support village heads during elections. Meanwhile, opposing groups often experience marginalization in access to village programs and facilities. As a result, the village development process loses its aspect of justice, and community participation becomes limited to only those who are "close" to power. This phenomenon is strengthened by the relatively closed and minimal supervision of the village. In many cases, village heads have very strong control over village fund management and recruitment of village officials (Indra & Khoirunurrofik, 2022). This condition opens up opportunities for the practice of nepotism and budget abuse, because administrative decisions do not always go through a consultative mechanism with the Village Consultative Body (BPD) or the community. As stated by Hadiz and Robison (2013), the patrimonial local power structure often turns public resources into political tools for village elites.

Another impact of money politics is the weakening of the accountability of village government. Village heads elected through the practice of money politics tend to place priority on personal political stability rather than on public transparency.

Government accountability is not directed to citizens as rational voters, but to a patronage network that helps win. This makes the mechanism of public supervision ineffective, because power relations have been built on debt and loyalty, not on equality between citizens and the government. In the long term, this condition has the potential to cause corruption and waste of village resources. Village funds that are supposed to be used for economic empowerment and infrastructure development are often allocated to pay "political debts" in the form of projects

or positions for supporters. As a result, development does not run optimally and the benefits are not felt equally by the community.

Money politics also has a psychological and social impact on rural communities. Social relations between citizens have become divided due to the polarization of political support. Residents who do not support elected candidates are often excluded from social activities or are no longer involved in village deliberations. This creates a social atmosphere that is not conducive to collaboration and mutual cooperation, two values that should be the main foundation of village community life (Aspinall & As'Ad, 2015).

Furthermore, money politics erodes the ethics of public services at the village level. Village chiefs who feel they are "buying office" tend to view power as a private investment that must be returned, not as a public mandate (Bebbington et al., 2004). Position orientation becomes economical, not devotional. In this context, local democracy loses its substance, as power is no longer used to serve the interests of the people, but to maintain the patronage structure and the interests of local elites. This finding is in line with the view of Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) who stated that the practice of money politics basically results in a procedural but substantially fragile democracy. The electoral process runs according to formal rules, but ethical values such as fairness, transparency, and accountability are lost in it. The politics of money creates a democracy that is "alive in form, but dead in the soul" a democracy that loses its moral integrity.

However, it is important to recognize that the negative impact of money politics is not permanent. In some cases, village chiefs who are aware of

their moral responsibility try to correct the practice after taking office, especially when social pressure from the community increases. Factors such as citizen political education, critical local media, and civil society participation can play an important role in driving accountability. Therefore, the eradication of money politics must be accompanied by strengthening institutional capacity and public participation. Village communities need to have the space and courage to supervise the running of the government. Village institutions such as BPD, customary institutions, and community organizations must be empowered to carry out social control functions. In addition, political literacy and public finance need to be strengthened so that residents understand their rights and can demand transparency from village officials. Thus, the prevention of money politics is not only carried out before the election, but also through transparent and participatory governance after the election.

In a broader framework, money politics has an effect on the sustainability of village development. When development decisions are driven by short-term political interests, the direction of development becomes unsustainable and not oriented towards long-term interests. Development tends to be directed towards symbolic projects that quickly see results, not on empowerment programs that increase the economic capacity of the community in a sustainable manner. Therefore, improving village governance after the election of the village head is very important. Money politics can only be phased out if the village government system is built on the principles of transparency, participation, accountability, and integrity. Empowering citizens to participate in

development planning and oversight should be a top priority, so that control of power does not only come from above, but also from below (Ash-Shidiqqi & Wibisono, 2018).

Thus, the impact of money politics on village governance and development is not only administrative, but also ideological and moral. Money politics has changed the meaning of power into a medium of exchange, shifting the value of public services into economic transactions. To break this chain, there needs to be a cultural and structural transformation that replaces village leadership as a form of community service, not as a political commodity that can be bought. Only in that way can local democracy grow into a system that is fair, with integrity, and truly on the side of the welfare of villagers.

Structural and Cultural Barriers in the Prevention of Money Politics

Efforts to prevent money politics in the election of village heads in Indonesia face obstacles that are not simple. Money politics is not only a matter of morality or law enforcement, but part of the social structure and political culture that has been rooted in the lives of rural communities. In practice, money politics operates through two main interlocking dimensions, namely structural barriers arising from power inequality and weak supervisory institutions, as well as cultural barriers that stem from social values and local political culture that are permissive to transactional practices.

Structural obstacles are evident in the imbalance between authority and supervision in the village government system. The village head has great authority in the management of village funds, recruitment of equipment, and development decision-making. However, the mechanism for monitoring

this authority is still weak. Supervisory institutions such as the Village Consultative Body (BPD) often do not function optimally as a power balancer. Based on the results of the interviews, many people do not know clearly the use of the village budget because deliberation and financial reports are often carried out in a mere formality. This situation creates space for the practice of patronage, budget abuse, and political corruption that is difficult for the law to touch (Hönig, 2019).

Structural weaknesses can also be seen in the lack of effectiveness of laws in dealing with the practice of money politics at the local level. Violations of village head elections are often only resolved administratively without clear criminal consequences. In addition, election committees that are supposed to be neutral often have social or political attachments to certain candidates, so that the supervisory function loses its independence. In this context, legal and institutional structures have not been able to build an electoral system that is free from political intervention and money transactions. Economic inequality is another dimension of structural barriers that strengthen money politics (Santosa & Sudirman, 2023; Suryono et al., 2023; Triantho & Santosa, 2023). Most of the villagers live in lower-middle economic conditions, with a high dependence on local elites who have greater economic resources. In such a situation, the money given by the village head candidate is not only considered as a form of campaign, but also as social assistance that alleviates the needs of life. This phenomenon confirms the view of Hadiz and Robison (2013) that local politics in Indonesia is still dominated by economic elites who are able to utilize socio-economic structures to maintain power through political patronage. Thus, money politics

became a mechanism that maintained the power imbalance between the elite and the lower society.

Meanwhile, cultural barriers are rooted in long-established social mindsets and norms in local political culture. In rural societies, social relationships are often built on reciprocity and communal solidarity. In this framework, giving money or goods ahead of the election is not always seen as a wrong act, but as a "distribution of sustenance" or a symbol of the candidate's concern for the citizens. The results of interviews with student respondents showed that most people in their home areas view giving money as a normal habit or tradition in every political contest. This finding is in line with the opinion of Berenschot (2018) who states that the practice of patronage in Indonesia gains social legitimacy because it is perceived as a mutually beneficial relationship between elites and society (Wibowo et al., 2024).

This pragmatic political culture is strengthened by the low political literacy of the community. Most residents do not understand the election of village heads as a democratic process that aims to elect quality leaders, but simply an opportunity to gain momentary material gains. Almond and Verba (2008) refer to this condition as a characteristic of *parochial* political culture, where citizens' awareness of political responsibility is still low and orientation towards democratic values has not been formed. As a result, money politics is no longer seen as a violation of political ethics, but rather part of a mutually accepted "social habit."

In a cultural context that upholds social hierarchy, the practice of money politics is also strengthened by reluctance and loyalty to local patrons. Refusing a gift from a candidate who is considered more influential or respected

can be considered disrespectful, even offensive to social relationships. Scott (1972) explains this phenomenon through the concept of *moral economy*, in which economic actions—including in political contexts—are often governed by social norms and collective morality, not just by individual rational considerations. Within this framework of local morality, money politics serves as a form of social solidarity and a mechanism to strengthen patron-client relationships.

These structural and cultural barriers interact with each other and reinforce each other. An unequal power structure creates a society's economic dependence on local elites, while social norms that emphasize reciprocity and reluctance reinforce the legitimacy of the practice of money politics. As a result, although money politics is legally prohibited, in practice it is still socially accepted. Candidates who do not give money are often considered stingy or do not care about the community. In this kind of social logic, legal justice is defeated by a local version of "social justice" that is more accepted by the community (Yandri, 2017). This condition shows that efforts to prevent money politics cannot rely only on legal or regulatory approaches, but must also include social and cultural transformations. Structural reforms such as increased supervision, transparency in budget management, and strengthening the independence of electoral institutions must go hand in hand with cultural reforms in the form of political education, public ethics campaigns, and strengthening the values of honesty and responsibility of citizens. Only through long-term changes in social values and behaviors can people develop an awareness that receiving money in elections is not a form of solidarity, but

an action that undermines the quality of democracy.

Aspinall and Berenschot (2019) emphasized that a healthy local democracy can only grow if there is a balance between power, participation, and political awareness of citizens. In the context of villages, this balance requires transparent governance, an economically independent society, and a political culture based on rationality and public morality. Without comprehensive structural and cultural change, money politics will continue to be part of the social system that is accepted and run, not opposed. Thus, the prevention of money politics at the village level is not only a matter of enforcing the rules, but also a matter of building collective awareness that a dignified democracy cannot be bought, but must be fought for through the values of integrity and shared responsibility.

Challenges and Strategies for Preventing Money Politics

Money politics in village head elections is a multidimensional challenge that is difficult to eradicate because it is deeply rooted in the social, economic, and cultural systems of rural communities. This phenomenon not only reflects the pragmatic behavior of individuals, but also indicates weak supervisory structures, power imbalances, and low political awareness of citizens. Therefore, the strategy of preventing money politics cannot only focus on the law enforcement aspect, but must be designed as a comprehensive effort that touches on the structural, cultural, and moral dimensions of rural communities.

One of the main challenges in preventing money politics is economic inequality and people's dependence on local elites. In rural communities, economic factors are the most dominant

reason behind receiving money from village head candidates. For some residents, giving money is seen not as a bribe, but as social assistance or a form of attention. This view is strengthened by the low level of welfare and lack of access to economic resources. In this context, money politics is not just a form of moral deviation, but a social mechanism for survival. According to Nichter (2014), vote buying behavior often arises from economic rationality formed by social inequality and urgent economic needs (Fратиwi et al., 2025)

In addition to economic factors, weak institutional and supervisory systems are also serious obstacles. In many cases, the village head election committee still has a social attachment to the candidate, making it difficult to be neutral. The supervision process from BPD and community institutions is also often formal, without strict follow-up. In fact, money politics violations are rarely brought into the legal realm because there is no written evidence or because people are reluctant to report. This condition shows the need for institutional reforms that strengthen the independence and professionalism of election supervisory agencies at the local level. The next challenge is a permissive and pragmatic political culture. Many village communities still view the election of village heads as a social transaction, not as a political momentum to determine a shared future. Money politics is considered a "custom" ahead of the election, which is legitimate as long as all candidates do so. This culture is reinforced by the reciprocity values that live in rural social systems, where giving and giving are part of the ethics of social relations. As stated by Berenschot (2018), the practice of patronage survives because it has strong social legitimacy, not just because of legal weaknesses.

In this situation, political education and the transformation of social values are key elements to change people's perspective on money politics. People should be given the understanding that accepting money is not only an unethical act, but it also weakens their position as citizens. Through a community-based political education approach, the public can be trained to see the relationship between the integrity of leaders and the quality of public services. Programs such as the *Village Democracy School* or the *Anti-Money Citizens Forum* can be an effective means to instill the values of participatory democracy and social accountability.

In addition, the economic empowerment of village communities needs to be part of a long-term strategy. Money politics will continue to live in a poor and economically dependent society. Therefore, strengthening the local economy through BUMDes, MSMEs, village cooperatives, and entrepreneurship training programs can be a real step to increase the independence of residents. As welfare increases, the value of money in the political context decreases, and people are better able to resist political transactions that degrade their dignity.

The next prevention strategy is institutional reform and a surveillance system based on public participation. The local government and the village head election committee must open up space for community involvement in supervision. Budget transparency, voter list publication, and technology-based violation reporting systems can increase public trust in the election process. Community-based monitoring has been proven to be more effective in preventing violations than top-down bureaucratic mechanisms. In addition to institutional and economic reforms, a cultural and

moral approach is also needed. In a society that still strongly upholds religious and traditional values, religious leaders and traditional leaders have a strategic role in shaping the political ethics of citizens. Sermons, customary deliberations, and social activities can be used as a medium to affirm that the practice of money politics is contrary to the values of honesty, responsibility, and trust. This cultural approach will be much more effective if it is associated with a value system that is already alive in society, rather than imposed from outside.

Another challenge that is no less important is the low commitment of the political elite in rejecting the practice of money politics. In many cases, village head candidates take advantage of the social and economic conditions of the community to strengthen their support base through the provision of money, basic necessities, or other material promises. As long as the elite still sees money politics as an effective winning strategy, change will not happen (Halida et al., 2022); (Ichsan et al., 2023; Suyatmo et al., 2023). Therefore, a binding political ethics mechanism is needed for village head candidates, for example through an integrity pact that is mutually agreed upon and witnessed by the community. By understanding the complexity of these challenges, the prevention of money politics must be carried out in a multi-level and collaborative manner. The central government, local governments, universities, civil society organizations, the media, and local communities must work together to build a clean and integrity village democracy movement. The government can initiate the *Anti-Money Politics Village* program as a form of locally-based national campaign that emphasizes political education,

participatory oversight, and public transparency.

Finally, the prevention of money politics cannot be achieved through regulation and punishment alone, but requires a revolution of social and moral consciousness. True local democracy can only grow when people understand that their votes have far greater value than the money they receive momentarily. As emphasized by Aspinall and Berenschot (2019), a democracy with integrity depends on a balance between power and political consciousness of citizens. By building this awareness collectively, money politics can be faced not as a social habit, but as a moral disease that must be cured together

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The phenomenon of money politics in village head elections reflects the complexity of social, economic, and cultural issues in Indonesia's local democracy. The results of the study show that this practice is influenced by three main factors, namely low economic conditions of the community, a pragmatic and patronage-based political culture, and weak oversight and law enforcement systems at the local level. Money politics not only reduces voter rationality, but also strengthens patron-client relationships that undermine the integrity of village administration. The impact is evident in gratitude-oriented governance, declining public accountability, and uneven village development. To overcome these problems, structural, cultural, and moral preventive measures are needed. Structurally, strengthening supervisory institutions such as the Village Consultative Body (BPD) and transparency in the election management process are priorities in order to make the democratic process more accountable. Culturally, community-based political

education and the role of religious and traditional leaders are important in fostering public awareness that money politics undermines democratic values. Morally, every village head candidate needs to sign an integrity pact as a form of public commitment to clean and fair democracy.

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