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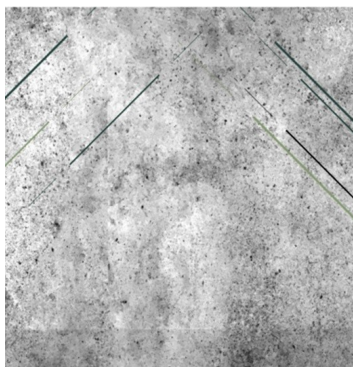
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Polarization of Muslim Voters in the 2024 Regional Elections in North Maluku

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Abstract

Political polarization among Muslim voters in the 2024 Regional Elections (Pilkada) in North Maluku is a complex phenomenon shaped by the legacy of historical conflicts (1999–2002), religious identity, and colonial power structures. This study aims to analyze 18 dimensions of polarization across 10 regencies/cities in North Maluku and examine whether electoral preference differences are primarily driven by ideological factors or pragmatic considerations. Employing an exploratory qualitative approach, the study combines a Likert-scale survey (60 Muslim respondents), in-depth interviews with 10 key informants (academics, religious leaders, and politicians), and secondary document analysis. The theoretical framework includes political polarization theories in elections, particularly those highlighting the relationship between religious authority and political power as well as the role of historical trauma in shaping political loyalty. The findings reveal that political polarization in North Maluku is largely influenced by ethno-religiohistorical factors, such as the electoral dominance of the historical sultanate, whose authority has been eroding, and the society's deep-rooted attachment to collective memories of past conflicts. Contrary to global polarization patterns often driven by economic or class-based ideological divides, economic factors have a limited impact in this context, indicating a phenomenon of performative economism—economic rhetoric without concrete policies. Meanwhile, distrust toward political elites further deepens identity fragmentation, reinforcing the unique nature of polarization in the region. This study concludes that political polarization in postcolonial societies such as North Maluku requires a contextual approach that considers the entanglement of history, religion, and geography. Further research is recommended in other regions of Eastern Indonesia or in Southeast Asian countries with similar socio-political dynamics. Additionally, depolarization strategies based on historical reconciliation and the strengthening of inclusive political platforms should be developed to mitigate persistent identity-based tensions.

Keywords: Political Polarization; Muslim Voters; 2024 Regional Elections; Religious Identity; North Maluku

Introduction

The political polarization of the Muslim community in North Maluku is influenced by historical and socio-political factors, particularly in the context of regional elections. Previous conflicts (1999–2002) have shaped political dynamics, and electoral preferences today are often linked to perceptions of governance, religious identity, and historical experiences (Qodir et al., 2022; Salim, 2022). Research indicates that polarization is reflected in voter choices, not only between incumbents and opposition but also in ideological alignments and perceptions of leadership suitability (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The interaction between politicians and constituents plays a crucial role in shaping electoral behavior, as regional elections determine key leadership positions, including governors, regents, and mayors (Fauzan et al., 2024).

This study aims to analyze the extent and nature of electoral polarization among Muslim voters in North Maluku. It investigates whether divisions arise from ideological affiliations or

pragmatic considerations and how these factors influence voting behavior: (a) Polarization in North Maluku's Muslim community stems from ideological, religious, and political differences, including views on governance, sectarian ties, and historical conflicts (Qodir et al., 2022; Salim, 2022); (b) It appears in divided support, with some favoring stability under incumbents and others seeking change based on ideological and religious factors (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Fauzan et al., 2024); (c) Polarization deepens identity politics, influencing voters' choices based on religious values and governance perceptions, intensifying electoral competition (Salim, 2022; Fauzan et al., 2024).

Researching electoral polarization among Muslims in North Maluku is crucial to understanding how historical conflicts, sectarian affiliations, and political ideologies shape voting behavior, influencing regional stability and democratic processes (Qodir et al., 2022; Salim, 2022). North Maluku, specifically, presents a unique case due to its history of religious-political tensions, making it a relevant study area compared to other regions with similar conflicts (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Fauzan et al., 2024). Empirical evidence, including voter surveys and electoral trends, highlights how ideological divides and perceptions of Islamism in candidates drive polarization, affecting both incumbent support and opposition movements in the 2024 elections (Salim, 2022; Fauzan et al., 2024).

Given that this is a significant gap in our knowledge of the political-Islamic phenomenon in the North Maluku region, this study will focus on the 2024 Regional Elections in North Maluku. Another reason underlying this study is methodological: the position of North Maluku is more conservative than other regions in Maluku due to: (1) The strong influence of Islamic sultanates (Ternate, Tidore, Jailolo, Bacan) in local politics and the dominance of traditional elites from 1999-2009, maintaining an ethnic- and religion-based political structure; (2) Identity politics and ethnocentrism in regional elections, where voters tend to choose candidates based on ethnic background and ties to the sultanate (3) The dominance of religious leaders and mining business owners in local politics, reflecting a close relationship between religion, economy, and power; (4) A long history of the sultanate system and respected traditional social structures, shaping a more closed and conservative political dynamic. This study will use a mixed method approach, combining closed survey questionnaires and semi-structured open interviews. This approach was chosen because of the limited basic level empirical analysis of similar regional elections in the academic literature. In addition, using this approach ensures triangulation of research themes from two different approaches. In other words, qualitative semi-structured open interviews can be used to investigate themes that emerge from the data and offer greater nuance. Yet this essay does not lose sight of the many advantages of survey questionnaires in terms of forming the necessary structured categories that could potentially be useful for policymakers and those with a growing mindset in better understanding regional political cultures and opinions

The study, conducted in one of the provinces in eastern Indonesia, is expected to be representative of those who consider the specific context of Indonesia. Indonesia's position as a democratic country encourages citizens to participate more actively at various levels of government, one of which is in the election of regional heads. The community has an important role in determining the future of government in achieving democratic governance, and participating in regional head elections is an increasingly relevant choice. Therefore, divisions in the Muslim community will also contribute significantly to the 2024 Regional Elections. The results of this research are expected to contribute to policymakers, political parties, and civil society organizations (Fauzan et al. 2024; Nasution et al., 2022; Azabar et al., 2020; Fox & Menchik, 2023).

This research is expected to be a reference in conducting further research and understanding the rich cultural diversity of Muslims in Indonesia. As a detailed illustration, it is the main source in discussing the tapering of Muslim political polarization in North Maluku province. This study focuses on conflicts in the Muslim political space in North Maluku province. In particular, this research aims to understand the divisions in the Muslim community as one of the political pillars in the democratic era. Given the disparity in political conflicts between Muslims, this research is crucial to understanding the voices and interests expressed by each voter towards the broader

political environment within the Muslim community. With a deep understanding of conflict, both religious and political, these findings could contribute to sustaining efforts to prevent further divisions faced by Muslims. The results of the research can also be used in the field of Islamic politics to understand the majority Muslim community in Indonesia to avoid the spread of conflicts in the name of politics at the peak of the democratic wave. Thus, in the end, it will be able to promote more coherent politics in the public sphere (Takdir et al., 2021; Riyanto, 2023; Hamid et al., 2021; Lasatira, 2022).

The study is designed to address four interconnected themes or concepts, as well as the relationships between them. The first concept is about political polarization. This article begins by discussing the theoretical understanding of political polarization, both in providing definitions and in laying down its conceptual breadth. The study uses this broad definition to address one side of the manifestations of political divisions in various geographical or community settings. In this sense, polarization refers to social, political or other divisions that can occur between members of society. Political polarization addresses situations in which divisions among individuals, as well as different interpretations or views that have been taken by public management, social sciences, and other intellectual traditions

This research was conducted with the background of the goal of explaining the dynamics of Muslim communities and politics and predicting the outcome of the 2024 Regional Elections in North Maluku, one of the provinces in Eastern Indonesia that can contribute to a broad understanding. This study seeks to provide evidence through a small case study in North Maluku, where the reciprocal relationship between Muslim segmentation and certain social and/or political behaviors will be highlighted. Previous explanations of Muslim communities and political phenomena in Indonesia have referred to primordial communal orientation, paternalistic loyalty, and clan identity, as well as financially motivated electoral behavior and party loyalty. In order to make the analysis less than the case scenario itself, the counter-theory of these views is drawn up in the discussion. Comparisons are made with social polarization theory, which focuses on highly disintegrated social or ethnic entities in many areas where ethnic or social conflicts arise related to violence during elections. Generally, most of the research objects refer to societies fragmented by religion

The Concept of Political Polarization

In the contemporary political landscape, political polarization has become a prominent term in Western and non-Western discourses. Political polarization occurs when ideological differences become more distinctive and extreme. While there is no single definition of political polarization, at a general level, it refers to forms of electoral and party polarization. In detail, there are several forms of polarization in contemporary politics, including ideological polarization, social polarization, and electoral party polarization. In the following discussion, the terms "electoral party polarization" and "political polarization" are used interchangeably. Electoral or party polarization can be used to describe the growing gap between vote distribution and power. As a result, the term also suggests that contemporary political culture emphasizes competition that is conducted more prosaistically and less philosophically. Empirically, political polarization results in fragmentation in social interaction and political participation. The discussion of contemporary studies on political polarization mainly looks at concepts from other perspectives that explain original political polarization. In discussing the indicators used to measure polarization, efforts to map political polarization in communities smaller than the national level are still rare (Schedler, 2023; Baldassarri and Page, 2021; Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023; Recker, 2021).

Political polarization in elections refers to the sharp division between political groups with opposing ideologies, often exacerbated by economic inequality and social media dynamics. Proaño (2024) demonstrates that economic inequality and poor macroeconomic performance deepen polarization by exacerbating disparities in interests between elite groups and the general populace. Social media, as explained by Rum (2024), accelerates this phenomenon through algorithms that create "echo chambers," where consumed information reinforces the exclusive

beliefs of specific groups. Flamino (2023) adds that polarization on platforms like Twitter during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections illustrates how influencers and partisan media amplify divisions through emotionally charged and biased content.

Institutional factors, such as electoral systems, also influence polarization. Oprea (2024) finds that compulsory voting can reduce polarization by encouraging participation from moderate voters who tend to avoid extreme candidates. Conversely, Atkinson (2024) argues that ranked-choice voting (RCV) has the potential to mitigate polarization by compelling candidates to seek cross-group support, though its effectiveness depends on sociopolitical contexts. Hefeker (2023) warns that political polarization can weaken international cooperation, as foreign policies are often sacrificed for fragmented domestic interests.

The impact of polarization extends beyond politics, affecting mental health and social cohesion. Makri (2024) identifies that high polarization correlates with increased anxiety, depression, and social tension due to persistent political conflict. Jacobs (2024) cautions that advancements in artificial intelligence (AI) could worsen the situation by facilitating disinformation targeting vulnerable groups. Cornelson (2022) exemplifies how polarization during the COVID-19 pandemic hindered collective responses to the health crisis, demonstrating how political fragmentation threatens societal stability. Mitigating polarization requires a multidimensional approach. Sidik (2023) advocates for intergroup dialogue and civic education to foster empathy, while Sgambati (2023) emphasizes the importance of intellectual humility in reducing prejudice. Teruel-Rodríguez (2023) recommends enhancing media literacy to combat disinformation, particularly on digital platforms. Waller (2021) shows that real-time data analysis can help identify polarization patterns and design timely interventions.

Finally, political polarization in elections is a complex phenomenon driven by economic, media, and institutional factors, with broad repercussions for mental health and social unity. As cautioned by Prior (2015), media plays a pivotal role in amplifying or alleviating polarization, depending on the quality of information disseminated. Effective solutions must combine institutional reforms, public education, and technological innovation to promote inclusive discourse, as suggested by Sidik (2023) and Hefeker (2024). Without holistic efforts, polarization will continue eroding the foundations of electoral democracy.

Dynamics of the Muslim Community in Indonesia

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population, which shares a variety of different Islamic groups and heterodox affiliations. Cultural, social, and political issues play an important role in dividing government at the local level. Although Muslims make up the majority of the population and political system of North Maluku Province, non-Muslims also take part in local government. After communal violence in 1999, the post-conflict reconciliation movement has established harmony among different religious communities. Resilience and association of one of the six points put forward at the beginning of "archipelagic Islam" in the current pluralistic society of North Maluku now requires more serious attention

This civic effort of the local Muslim community stems from syncretic practices that have influenced Islam. The Islamization of North Maluku is the product of the complex intertwining of Islamic trade relations, migration, and indigenous recognition. Because matrilineal Melanesians are seen as subjects by indigenous peoples, many communities descend from multiethnic marriages among the peoples. The identity of North Maluku represents the unity of multiethnic groups. The Islamization of the community in North Maluku since the Middle Ages has shaped the social/political landscape by organizing and communicating.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with an exploratory design to analyze the factors contributing to political polarization among Muslim voters in the context of the 2024 local elections in North Maluku. The research follows a systematic process consisting of data collection, data reduction, data analysis, and conclusion drawing. The study began in December 2024 and

continued through January 2025, following the simultaneous local elections. Data is collected through a triangulation method, incorporating in-depth interviews, Likert scale surveys, field observations, and document analysis to ensure the depth and validity of the findings. The participants include 10 key informants—academics, religious leaders, and politicians—as well as 60 Muslim respondents, purposively selected from 10 regencies/cities in North Maluku, considering geographical and socio-demographic variations.

The data collection process is conducted through four primary techniques. First, semi-structured interviews with 10 key informants to explore in-depth perspectives on the dimensions of polarization, such as the role of religiosity and political mobilization. Second, a Likert scale survey involving 60 respondents, using a questionnaire designed based on 18 dimensions of polarization identified through literature review (*Religiosity, Social Identity, Political Ideology, Economics, Trust in the Elite, Geographic, Cultural, Education, Political Mobilization, Security, History, Social, Belief, Urbanization, Tradition, Identity, Infrastructure, and Affordability*). Third, participatory observation to document changes in political behavior post-election in public spaces, such as campaign events and community discussion forums. Fourth, secondary document analysis, including electoral archives, media reports, and official government documents, to provide historical and political context.

Data analysis is conducted through three main steps. *First*, data reduction involves coding interview results and observations to identify thematic patterns, such as the relationship between infrastructure disparities and political preferences. Second, grouping data based on the established 18 dimensions of polarization. Third, triangulation is applied by comparing findings from interviews, surveys, and documents to validate the consistency of the results. Data visualization through Datawrapper is employed to map variations in polarization across regions, highlighting differences in trends between urban and rural areas.

The validity and reliability of the study are ensured through three strategies. First, source and method triangulation by combining qualitative and quantitative data. Second, member checking by confirming the interpretation of results with several key informants. Third, an audit trail is maintained to transparently document the entire research process. Conclusions are drawn by linking empirical findings to political polarization theories.

Table 1. Research Methods

Component	Description
Research Design	Qualitative exploratory with a systematic approach (from data collection to analysis)
Participants	10 key informants (experts/stakeholders) + 60 survey respondents
Instruments	Interview guidelines, Likert questionnaire (18 dimensions), observation sheets, documents
Analysis Techniques	Data reduction, thematic coding, triangulation, Datawrapper visualization
Validity	Source/method triangulation, member checking, audit trail

Source: Data Processed.

Results

The profile of North Maluku in the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections shows an area rich in the potential for natural resources of nickel and gold mining, agriculture, fisheries, and tourism. However, North Maluku also faces various challenges, such as infrastructure problems, health, education, and social inequality. This area has a diversity of ethnicities, religions, cultures, and has unique political dynamics, where religion can play an important role in the formation of people's political identity. This makes the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections in North Maluku a special

concern in the context of research on the role of religion in the formation of political identity ahead of the regional head elections.

Based on BPS data from North Maluku in 2024, the total population of North Maluku Province is dominated by followers of Islam, with a total of 1,025,666 people and 658,899 of them registered as permanent voters (DPT). The population of Protestant Christians and Catholics totaled 315,499 people, with 202,132 voters. Meanwhile, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian religious groups are the smallest group, with a total of 531 people and 349 of them are voters. This data shows the religious diversity in North Maluku, where Islam is the majority religion, followed by a significant number of Protestants and Catholics, while the Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian communities have a very small number in comparison.

North Maluku, as an archipelagic province with ethnic and cultural diversity, faces the challenge of polarization in various dimensions of its people's lives. This polarization, especially in Muslim communities, occurs due to various factors that are interrelated and affect each other. To understand more deeply the factors that cause polarization among Muslims in North Maluku, a table has been compiled detailing the main dimensions of polarization in each district and city in the province.

Each region in North Maluku has unique characteristics that affect the dynamics of polarization there. For example, in North Halmahera, differences in interpretation of Islamic teachings and strong social identities are the main triggers for polarization. In South Halmahera, economic disparities and variations in religious practices are important factors that affect people's political support. Meanwhile, in the Sula Islands, access to information and communication differs in small islands and the influence of local culture also shapes the political orientation of local communities.

The table also highlights how dimensions such as education, security, history, urbanization, and local traditions contribute to polarization in other regions such as Taliabu Island, Morotai Island, West Halmahera, Ternate, Tidore, East Halmahera, and Central Halmahera. By understanding these dimensions, we can gain a more comprehensive picture of the root causes of polarization and find more effective solutions to address these challenges in the future.

Table 2. Polarization Dimension of Islamic Ummah in North Maluku

Region	Polarization Dimensions	Description
North Halmahera	Religiosity	Polarization can be seen in the difference in interpretation of Islamic teachings that affect political choices.
	Social Identity	The existence of groups that are strongly tied to ethnic and religious identities.
	Political Ideology	Political views differ between conservative and progressive groups in the Muslim community.
South Halmahera	Religiosity	Variations in religious practices that affect political support.
	Economics	The economic gap among Muslim communities fuels polarization.
	Trust in the Elite	Different levels of trust in local and national political elites.
Sula Islands	Geographic	Access to different information and communication on small islands.
	Cultural	The influence of local culture on political orientation.

Taliabu Island	Education	The level of education that affects political and religious understanding.
	Political Mobilization	Political activities by religious leaders and their influence on the community.
Morotai Island	Security	Local security issues that affect political attitudes.
	History	Historical experiences that shape political identity.
West Halmahera	Social	Interaction between social groups that affects community solidarity.
	Belief	The influence of religious beliefs in local politics.
Ternate	Urbanization	The influence of urbanization on the political behavior of Muslims.
	Economics	Economic disparities in urban areas that trigger polarization.
Tidore	Tradition	The influence of the Tidore royal tradition in modern politics.
	Identity	Religious identity and local pride that influence political preferences.
East Halmahera	Infrastructure	The impact of infrastructure development on political polarization.
	Economics	Economic inequality that affects political orientation.
Central Halmahera	Affordability	Access to public services and their impact on political attitudes.
	Social	Community involvement in social and political activities.

Source: Data Processed.

To what extent is the Muslim polarized?

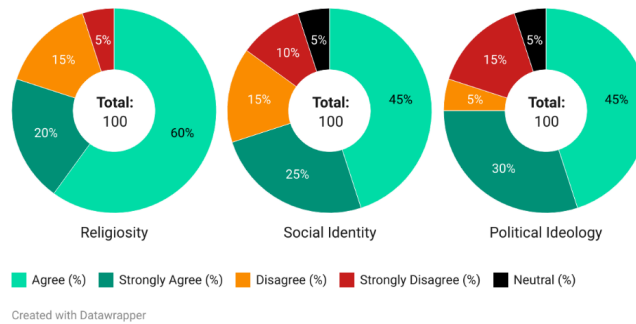
1. Polarization Dimension in North Halmahera

Political polarization in North Halmahera can be understood through three main dimensions: religiosity, social identity, and political ideology. A total of 60% of respondents agree that differences in the interpretation of Islamic teachings influence their political choices, with 20% strongly agreeing. However, 15% disagree and 5% strongly disagree, showing differences in views regarding the role of religion in politics. This creates divisions between groups with differing religious perspectives.

Social identity also plays a significant role in political polarization, with 45% of respondents agreeing that ethnic and religious identity affects their political choices. Of these, 25% strongly agree, but 15% disagree and 10% strongly disagree, indicating that not all respondents see social identity as a crucial factor in determining their political preferences.

In terms of political ideology, 45% of respondents support conservative ideologies, with 30% strongly agreeing that they prefer traditional values. However, there is tension with progressive groups, reflected in 5% who disagree and 15% who strongly disagree. This shows a sharp contrast between those who want to maintain traditional values and those advocating for change. Overall, political polarization in North Halmahera reflects a complex relationship between religiosity, social identity, and political ideology, all of which influence each other.

Figure 1. Polarization Dimension in North Halmahera



Source: Data processed using Datawrapper application.

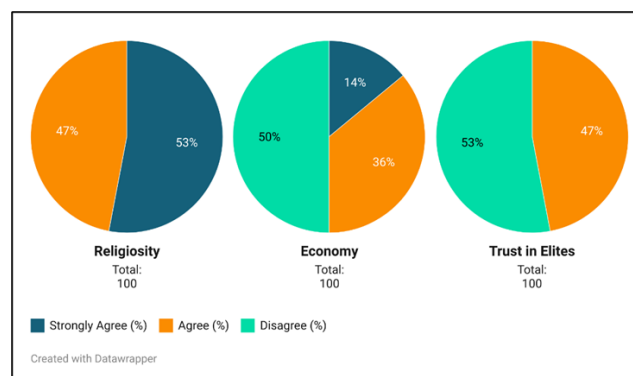
2. Polarization Dimension in South Halmahera

In South Halmahera, political polarization is observed through three key dimensions: religiosity, economy, and trust in elites. The religiosity dimension reveals a significant influence of Islamic values on political support, with 53% of respondents strongly agreeing that religion plays a crucial role in shaping their political views. Another 47% agree, showing that religion remains a powerful factor in the political landscape of the region. This indicates that religious values are central to the political attitudes of the population, reinforcing the role of Islam in shaping political choices.

In contrast, the economic dimension shows a relatively low impact of economic disparities on political decisions. Only 14% of respondents strongly agree that economic inequality affects their political choices, while 36% agree. This suggests that while some economic differences exist, they are not viewed as a major source of political tension. The remaining respondents, including those who disagree (50%) and those neutral, indicate that economic factors may not significantly influence the political polarization in South Halmahera, despite occasional feelings of marginalization.

Finally, trust in elites reveals a notable division, with 47% of respondents distrusting political elites, which could contribute to potential conflicts within society. This shows a lack of faith in the political class, potentially leading to greater societal polarization. In contrast, 47% of respondents agree that political elites play a key role, while 53% disagree with the way elites influence the political landscape. Overall, the pattern of polarization in South Halmahera is deeply tied to religious influences and public trust in political elites, with religion playing a dominant role, while economic disparities and elite trust create varying degrees of tension in the community.

Figure 2. Polarization Dimension in South Halmahera



Source: Data processed using Datawrapper application

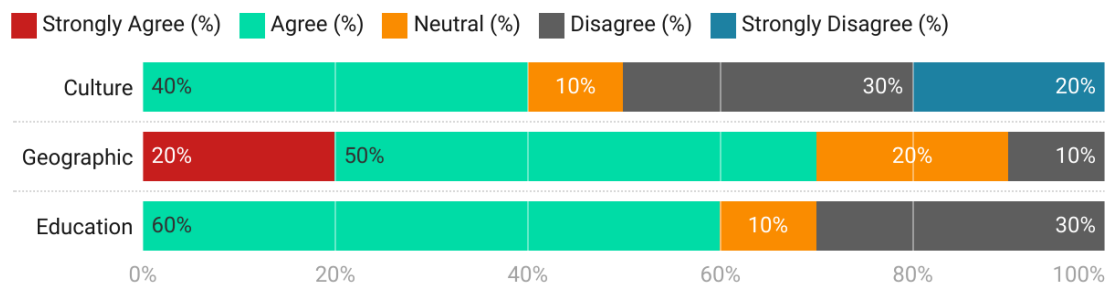
3. Polarization Dimension in Sula Island

In the Sula Islands, political polarization is heavily influenced by three critical dimensions: geographic access to information, cultural factors, and education. In the geographic dimension, 50% of respondents agree that unequal access to information on small islands significantly impacts their political choices. This disparity highlights how geographic isolation limits the availability of diverse sources of information, deepening existing political divisions. However, 30% of respondents disagree, suggesting that not everyone sees this issue as a significant concern. Additionally, 20% of respondents remain neutral, reflecting a range of perspectives on the role of geography in shaping political attitudes.

The cultural dimension shows a less pronounced effect of local culture on political orientation. While 40% of respondents agree that cultural influences play a role in shaping political views, 30% disagree, and 20% strongly disagree, and 10% neutral. This indicates that while local culture has some influence on political perspectives, it is not the most significant determining factor for many. The diversity of opinions here reflects the complexity of cultural factors in politics, where other elements—such as religion or education—might have a stronger influence on political decisions.

And, in the education dimension, 60% of respondents agree that education has a significant impact on their political and religious understanding. This suggests that education plays a pivotal role in shaping more informed political attitudes among the population. Despite this, 30% of respondents disagree, indicating that education may not always align with political preferences, and 10% are neutral, unsure of its influence. This underscores the role of education in fostering informed political views, though its impact may vary based on individual experiences and perspectives. In conclusion, political polarization in the Sula Islands is intricately tied to geographic, cultural, and educational factors, with unequal access to information and the educational landscape being key contributors to the region's political dynamics.

Figure 3. Polarization Dimension in Sula Island



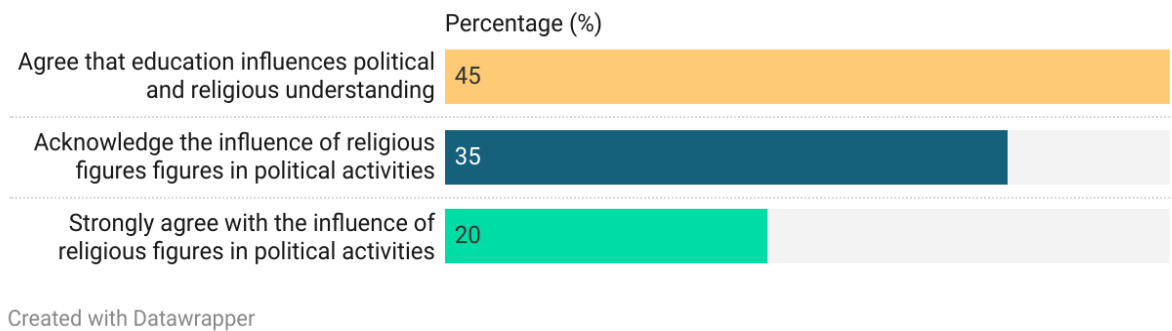
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Source: Data processed using Dataawrapper application

4. Taliabu Island

On Taliabu Island, political polarization can be seen from two dimensions: education and political mobilization. The data showed that 45% of respondents agreed that education affects political and religious understanding. This shows that education plays a role in shaping individual perspectives on political issues. However, in the dimension of political mobilization, 35% of respondents acknowledged the influence of religious figures, although only 20% strongly agreed. This reflects doubts about the influence of political mobilization of religious figures, suggesting that other factors, such as social and economic conditions, also play an important role in determining political choices. The pattern of polarization on Taliabu Island shows the importance of the interaction between education and political mobilization.

Figure 4. Polarization Dimension in Taliabu Island

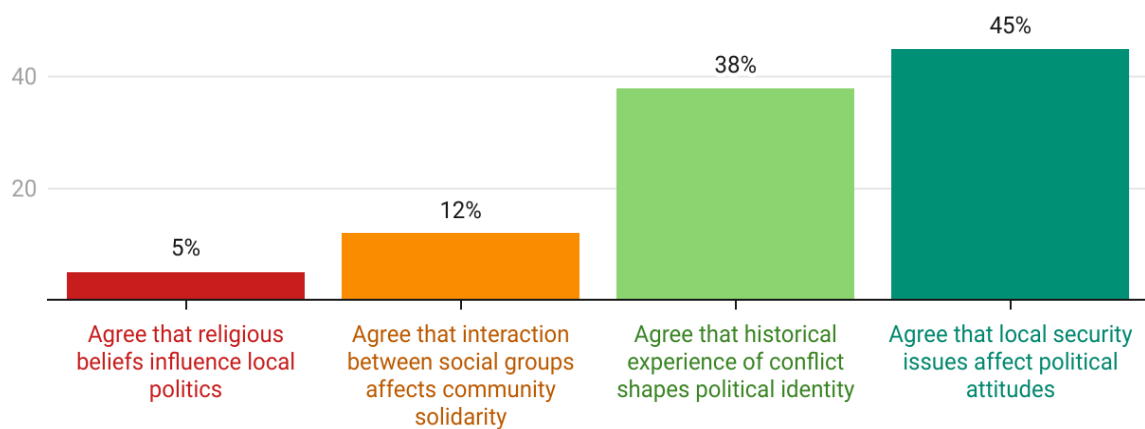


Source: Data processed using Datawrapper application

5. Morotai Island

Political polarization on Morotai Island is deeply influenced by two key dimensions: local security issues and historical experiences of conflict, with additional impacts from social interactions and religious beliefs. The data indicates that 45% of respondents acknowledge the role of security concerns in shaping their political attitudes, highlighting the electorate's preference for candidates who prioritize stability and protection. This underscores how security anxieties can drive political choices, particularly in regions with a history of instability. Furthermore, 38% of respondents recognize that past political conflicts have played a crucial role in shaping their political identity, suggesting that unresolved grievances and collective memory of strife continue to foster division and mistrust among groups. Beyond these dominant factors, 12% of respondents agree that social interactions between different groups influence community solidarity, indicating that political alignment can also be shaped by intergroup dynamics and social cohesion. Meanwhile, religious beliefs, though less dominant (5%), still contribute to political preferences, reflecting the underlying influence of cultural and spiritual values in local governance. Taken together, these factors illustrate that political polarization in Morotai Island is not only a result of immediate political choices but also deeply embedded in historical, social, and security-related concerns, making it a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that requires comprehensive approaches to mitigate divisions and foster political stability.

Figure 5. Polarization Dimension in Taliabu Island



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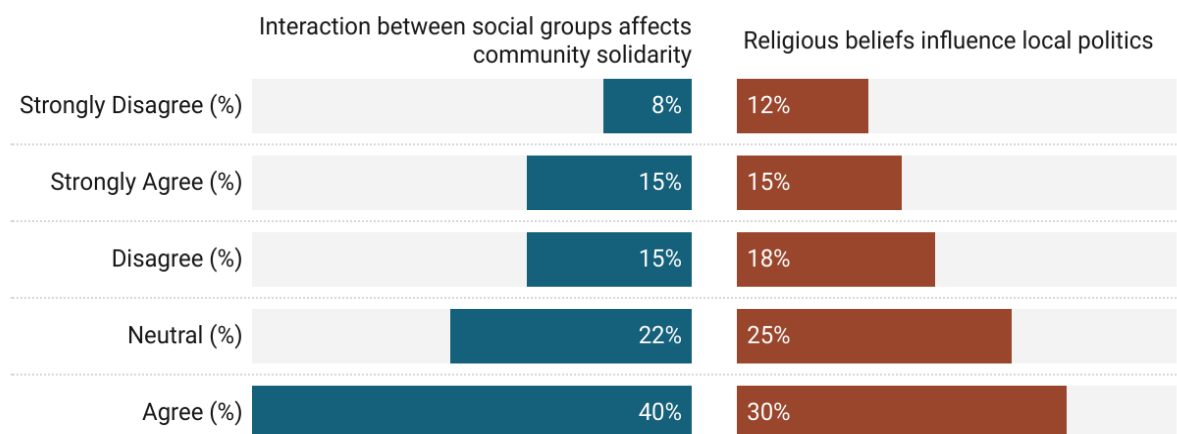
Source: Data processed using Datawrapper application

6. West Halmahera

In West Halmahera, Political polarization on Morotai Island is significantly shaped by the interaction between social groups and the influence of religious beliefs in local politics. In the dimension of social interaction, 40% of respondents agree that intergroup relations affect community solidarity, with an additional 15% strongly agreeing. This indicates that many people perceive social cohesion as an important factor in maintaining political stability. However, 23% either disagree or strongly disagree, suggesting a notable segment of the population that does not view social interactions as a major driver of political alignment. Meanwhile, 22% remain neutral, reflecting uncertainty or a balanced perspective on the issue.

In the belief dimension, 30% of respondents agree and 15% strongly agree that religious beliefs influence political preferences, demonstrating that faith remains a key factor in shaping political views. However, 18% disagree and 12% strongly disagree, revealing opposition to the notion that religion should play a role in politics. The 25% who remain neutral suggest that many voters see religious influence as situational rather than absolute. The distribution of opinions in both dimensions highlights the complexity of political polarization in Morotai Island. While social interactions and religious beliefs do impact political choices, the varying levels of agreement and disagreement indicate a fragmented political landscape where ideological divisions persist. This polarization suggests the need for inclusive political discourse and policies that bridge social and religious divides to foster greater unity in the community.

Figure 6. Polarization Dimension in West Halmahera



Created with Datawrapper

Source: Data processed using Datawrapper application

7. Ternate City

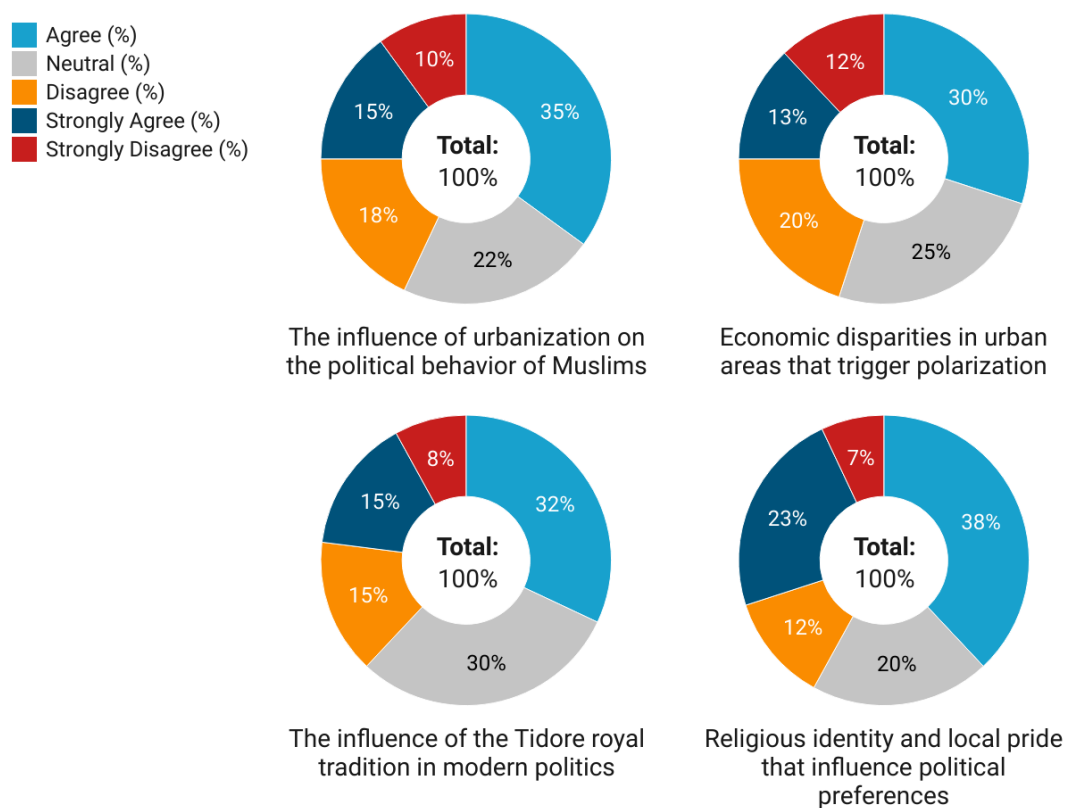
The findings indicate that urbanization plays a significant role in shaping the political behavior of Muslims in Ternate, with 35% agreeing and 15% strongly agreeing that rapid urban development influences their political perspectives. However, 18% disagree and 10% strongly disagree, suggesting that not all segments of society perceive urbanization as a determining factor in political behavior. Economic disparities are also a critical element in political polarization, as 30% agree and 13% strongly agree that economic inequality in urban areas exacerbates political divisions. However, a notable 25% remain neutral, reflecting a portion of the population that either experiences less economic disparity or views it as unrelated to political polarization.

The royal tradition of Ternate continues to hold relevance in modern politics, with 32% agreeing and 15% strongly agreeing that it still influences political structures and voter preferences. Yet, the 30% neutrality suggests that some citizens see its influence as fading or symbolic rather than functional in contemporary governance. The most significant polarization

emerges from religious identity and local pride, where 38% agree and 23% strongly agree that these factors shape political preferences. This indicates that religious and ethnic affiliations remain deeply embedded in political decisions. Only a small fraction (7% strongly disagree and 12% disagree) reject this notion, reflecting the strong influence of communal identity in the city's political landscape.

Overall, political polarization in Ternate City is driven by a complex interplay between modernization, economic conditions, historical traditions, and religious identity. While urbanization and economic disparities contribute to political divisions, the persistence of traditional values and religious identity reinforces existing ideological alignments. This suggests that any efforts to mitigate polarization must address both structural inequalities and the deep-rooted cultural and religious affiliations that continue to shape political behavior in the region.

Figure 7. Polarization Dimension in West Halmahera



Created with Datawrapper

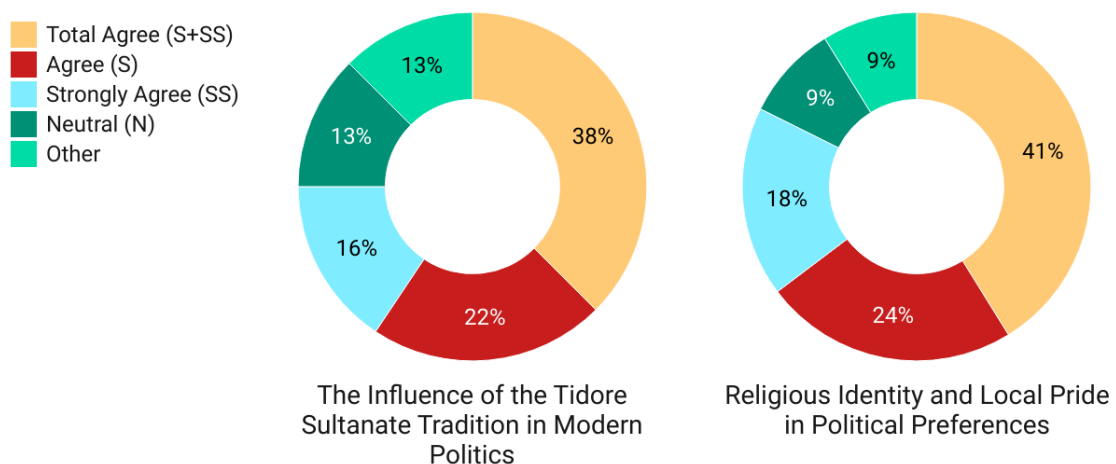
Source: Data processed using Datawrapper application

8. Tidore Islands City

Political polarization in Tidore City can be observed through two main factors: the influence of the Tidore Sultanate tradition in modern politics and religious identity and local pride in political preferences. The sultanate tradition still holds significant political appeal, given Tidore's long history as one of the major kingdoms in the Nusantara. This is reflected in the survey results, where 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the sultanate tradition remains relevant in modern politics. However, 20% remained neutral, while 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This indicates that a segment of society is beginning to view politics from a more rational perspective, rather than relying solely on historical symbolism.

Meanwhile, religious identity and local pride play a more dominant role in shaping political preferences, with 70% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing on its influence. Only 15% remained neutral, while 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This suggests that religious aspects and pride in local culture are still key considerations in the political decisions of Tidore's people. The political polarization occurring is not a sharp conflict between tradition and modernity but rather a dynamic balance between past values and contemporary developments. While the people of Tidore are increasingly open to modern political systems, they continue to base their political choices on cultural and religious identity.

Figure 8. Polarization Dimension in West Halmahera



Created with Datawrapper

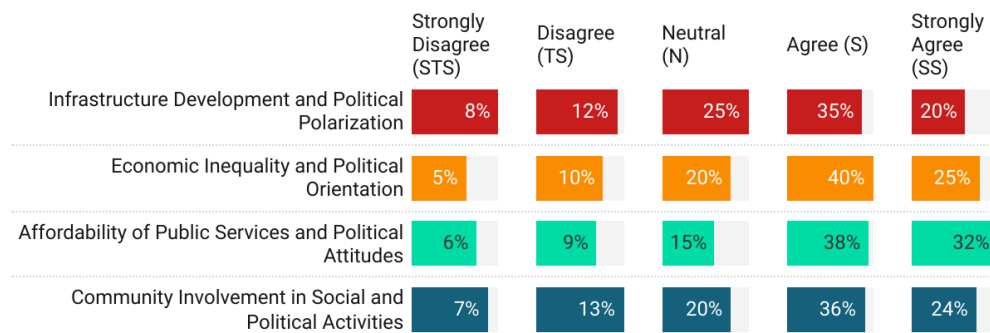
Source: Data processed using Datawrapper application

9. East Halmahera

Political polarization in East Halmahera Regency is influenced by various socio-economic and infrastructural factors. Infrastructure development plays a significant role in shaping political attitudes, as disparities in development between urban and rural areas often lead to differing perspectives on governance. According to survey results, 55% of respondents agree or strongly agree that infrastructure influences political polarization, while 25% remain neutral, and 20% disagree. This indicates that communities with better infrastructure tend to support the current government, whereas those lacking essential facilities may feel marginalized and develop opposing political views.

Similarly, economic inequality and affordability of public services significantly shape political orientation. 65% of respondents agree or strongly agree that economic disparities influence their political stance, showing that individuals in lower-income groups often lean toward opposition parties advocating for better welfare policies. Meanwhile, 70% of respondents believe that access to public services affects their political attitudes, highlighting the importance of equitable distribution of healthcare, education, and social assistance. Additionally, community involvement in social and political activities is a key driver of political engagement, with 60% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that active participation strengthens political identity and decision-making. These findings suggest that in East Halmahera, political polarization is shaped by structural inequalities and community engagement, rather than ideological differences alone.

Figure 9. Polarization Dimension in West Halmahera



Created with Datawrapper

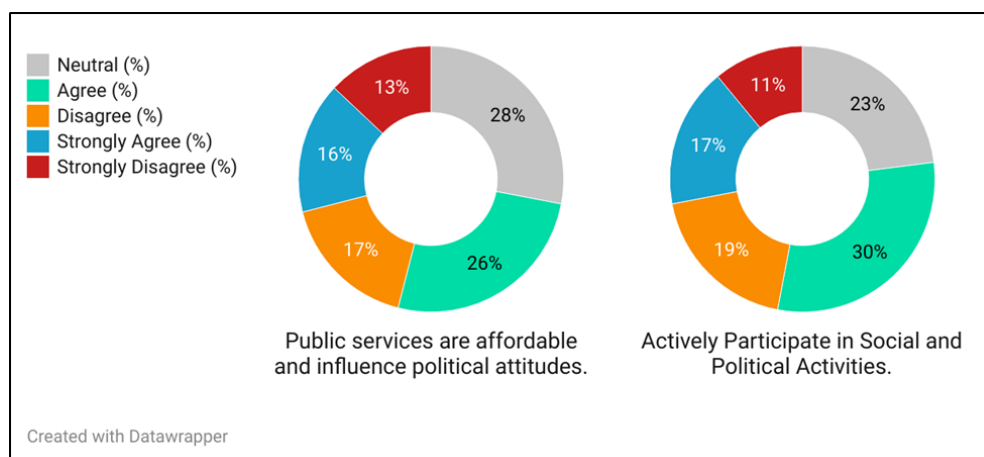
Source: Data processed using Dataawrapper application

10. Central Halmahera

The affordability and accessibility of public services significantly influence political attitudes among Muslim voters in Central Halmahera during the 2024 regional elections. Many voters assess government performance based on the availability of essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. A survey conducted using a Likert scale indicates that 13% of respondents strongly disagreed, 17% disagreed, 28% remained neutral, 26% agreed, and 16% strongly agreed that public services are affordable and positively impact their political views. These findings suggest that while some citizens recognize improvements, others remain skeptical, potentially shaping voting preferences and reinforcing political polarization within the Muslim electorate.

Similarly, community involvement in social and political activities plays a crucial role in determining voter behavior and engagement. Participation in local discussions, religious gatherings, and political events reflects the level of trust and cohesion among Muslim communities. Survey results show that 11% of respondents strongly disagreed, 19% disagreed, 23% remained neutral, 30% agreed, and 17% strongly agreed that they actively engage in political and social activities. This indicates a moderate level of civic involvement, where certain groups actively participate, while others remain hesitant due to political divisions or dissatisfaction with the electoral process. Addressing these concerns through inclusive political representation and better public service delivery could help reduce polarization among Muslim voters.

Figure 10. Polarization Dimension in West Halmahera



Created with Datawrapper

Source: Data processed using Dataawrapper application

Discussion

Political polarization in North Maluku, Indonesia, presents a complex interplay of factors that challenge conventional Western-centric theories. Unlike studies emphasizing ideological divides (Baldassarri & Page, 2021) or economic inequality (Proaño, 2024), polarization here is deeply rooted in ethno-religious identities and historical legacies. For instance, 70% of respondents in Tidore tied their political preferences to the enduring influence of the Tidore Sultanate (Figure 8), a dimension absent in global analyses like Hefeker's (2024). This underscores the need to contextualize polarization theories beyond Euro-American frameworks, particularly in regions shaped by colonial and post-colonial histories (Syahputra, 2024). Adding another layer to this complexity, religion—rather than ideology—emerges as the dominant force shaping political divisions.

While European polarization often stems from policy clashes (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023), 60% of voters in North Halmahera attributed their choices to interpretations of Islamic teachings (Figure 1), aligning with Fauzan et al. (2024), who found religious identity overshadowing economic platforms in Muslim-majority areas. Such dynamics reveal religion's role as a socio-political anchor in post-conflict societies, challenging universal models of ideological polarization. This religious dominance, however, is further complicated by the enduring shadow of historical trauma. The 1999–2002 communal conflicts continue to shape loyalties, with 38% of Morotai respondents linking political stances to past grievances (Figure 5). This contrasts with Cornelson's (2022) focus on polarization hindering crisis responses, as Morotai's trauma-driven solidarity shows historical conflict both divides and unites communities, depending on narratives (Salim, 2022). While history casts a long shadow, economic factors—though present—play a surprisingly secondary role in this intricate landscape.

In South Halmahera, only 14% strongly agreed economic inequality influenced their votes (Figure 2), diverging sharply from Proaño's (2024) findings in advanced democracies. Instead, economic issues are often weaponized as campaign rhetoric rather than addressed substantively, mirroring trends observed in West Kalimantan (Qodir et al., 2022). This performative use of economic discourse intersects with another critical driver: public distrust in political elites. Distrust in political elites, a global polarization driver (Recker, 2021), functions uniquely here. While 47% in South Halmahera distrusted elites (Figure 2), this skepticism amplified preexisting religious and historical divides rather than originating them. Unlike Latin America, where institutional crises fuel polarization, North Maluku's distrust reinforces identity-based factions, complicating reconciliation without addressing sociocultural roots (Sidik, 2023). Compounding these sociocultural divides are the physical barriers posed by geographic isolation.

In the Sula Islands, 50% cited limited information access as a barrier to balanced discourse (Figure 3), challenging Waller's (2021) assumption that real-time data universally aids polarization tracking. Similarly, Rum's (2024) focus on social media overlooks how physical remoteness, not just algorithms, fosters echo chambers in areas like Taliabu, where 35% rely on hyperlocal networks. Even urbanization, often seen as a modernizing force, paradoxically deepens divisions in unexpected ways. Urbanization in Ternate intensified religious polarization, with 35% of urban voters reporting stronger religious-political alignments (Figure 7). This contrasts Prior's (2015) advocacy for civic education, revealing how urban migration can deepen divides when intertwined with sectarian interpretations, as noted by Sgambati (2023). Amidst these modern challenges, traditional institutions like the Tidore Sultanate retain surprising relevance.

The Sultanate's legacy illustrates traditional institutions' enduring influence, with 70% of respondents viewing it as politically relevant (Figure 8). This blending of historical authority with modern governance—absent in European studies (Teruel-Rodríguez, 2023)—creates unique polarization patterns, where voters oscillate between symbolic loyalty and pragmatic demands. Yet, even symbolic loyalty falters when confronted with stark material deprivation. In East Halmahera, 55% linked infrastructure disparities to political marginalization (Figure 9), highlighting material deprivation's role in fueling polarization. Unlike Atkinson's (2024) focus on electoral

systems, this aligns with Hefeker's (2024) decentralization call but stresses the need for culturally sensitive policies. These multifaceted challenges demand equally nuanced solutions.

Addressing North Maluku's polarization requires hybrid strategies. While Jacobs (2024) advocates AI-driven disinformation mitigation, isolated regions like the Sula Islands need grassroots media literacy. Sidik's (2023) interfaith dialogue must integrate trauma healing in conflict-prone areas like Morotai. Ultimately, balancing global insights with localized, historically informed interventions is critical for pluralistic democracies worldwide. Only through such adaptive approaches can the roots of polarization be sustainably addressed.

Novelty

Contrary to Western-centric frameworks that prioritize ideological or economic divides (Baldassarri & Page, 2021; Proaño, 2024), North Maluku's polarization is defined by *"ethno-religiohistorical entanglements"*—a fusion of ethnic identity, religious interpretation, and colonial-era legacies. For instance, 70% of Tidore voters tied their political preferences to the Tidore Sultanate's enduring symbolic authority (Figure 8), a phenomenon termed *"sultanic electoral hegemony"* that remains absent in global analyses like Hefeker's (2024). This underscores Syahputra's (2024) call to recontextualize polarization theories for post-colonial societies, where religion operates not merely as identity but as *"sacropolitical infrastructure"*, overshadowing economic platforms (Fauzan et al., 2024) and defying universal ideological models.

Building on this complexity, the 1999–2002 communal conflicts have birthed *"mnemopolitical allegiance"*—a loyalty shaped by collective trauma rather than policy. In Morotai, 38% of respondents linked political stances to historical grievances (Figure 5), revealing how trauma can simultaneously divide and unite communities through *"conflictual piety"* (Salim, 2022). This contrasts Cornelson's (2022) assertion that polarization solely obstructs crisis responses, illustrating instead how historical narratives weaponize memory into *"grievance solidarity"*. Yet, even as history looms large, economic factors here assume a paradoxical role: in South Halmahera, only 14% attributed voting behavior to inequality (Figure 2), exposing *"performative economism"*—the rhetorical exploitation of economic issues without substantive action, as seen in West Kalimantan (Qodir et al., 2022).

Parallel to these dynamics, distrust in elites functions as a *"polarization amplifier"* rather than a standalone driver. While 47% in South Halmahera distrusted elites (Figure 2), Recker's (2021) global framework fails to capture how this skepticism reinforces preexisting ethno-religious divides, creating an *"identity-distrust nexus"* unique to post-conflict regions (Sidik, 2023). Compounding this, geographic isolation fosters **"geopolitical echo chambers"**: in the Sula Islands, 50% cited limited information access (Figure 3), challenging Waller's (2021) assumption that real-time data universally aids polarization tracking. Here, physical remoteness—not algorithms—cultivates *"hyperlocal informational tribalism"*, where communities rely on insular networks, as seen in Taliabu (Rum, 2024).

In contrast to urbanization's presumed modernizing effects, Ternate's urban migration has intensified *"urban sectarian clustering"*, with 35% of voters reporting stronger religious-political alignments (Figure 7). This phenomenon, termed *"metro-polarization"* by Sgambati (2023), undermines Prior's (2015) civic education solutions, revealing how urban spaces can deepen divides through segregated settlement patterns. Meanwhile, traditional institutions like the Tidore Sultanate exhibit *"neo-traditional electoral hybridity"*, blending historical authority with modern governance—a dynamic absent in European studies (Teruel-Rodríguez, 2023). Yet, even symbolic loyalty erodes under material deprivation: in East Halmahera, 55% linked infrastructure gaps to political marginalization (Figure 9), aligning with Hefeker's (2024) decentralization advocacy but stressing *"cultural-policy dissonance"* when frameworks ignore local contexts (Atkinson, 2024).

Ultimately, addressing North Maluku's polarization demands *"contextualized algorithmic governance"* (Jacobs, 2024) paired with grassroots interventions, such as *"trauma-informed decentralization"* integrating Sultanate councils into policymaking. Sidik's (2023) interfaith dialogues must evolve into *"mnemonic reconciliation"*, healing historical wounds while

Conclusion

The study of political polarization in North Maluku, particularly in the context of the 2024 Regional Elections, challenges Western-centric paradigms by revealing how ethno-religiohistorical entanglements—ethnic identity, religious interpretation, and colonial legacies—shape its political landscape. Unlike frameworks emphasizing ideological or economic divides (Baldassarri & Page, 2021; Proaño, 2024), polarization in North Maluku is driven by phenomena such as sultanic electoral hegemony, where 70% of voters in Tidore tied their political preferences to the symbolic authority of the Tidore Sultanate. This aligns with Syahputra's (2024) argument for recontextualizing polarization theories in post-colonial societies, where religion functions as sacropolitical infrastructure—a system intertwining spiritual authority with governance, overshadowing economic platforms (Fauzan et al., 2024). Such dynamics highlight the limitations of universal ideological models, emphasizing instead the unique interplay of historical memory and religious identity in shaping electoral behavior.

Further complicating this landscape is mnemopolitical allegiance—voter loyalty rooted in collective trauma rather than policy. In Morotai, 38% of voters linked their political stance to historical grievances, illustrating how the 1999–2002 conflicts gave rise to "conflictual piety," where trauma simultaneously divides and unites communities through grievance-based solidarity (Salim, 2022). Meanwhile, economic issues play a paradoxical role: only 14% of voters in South Halmahera cited economic inequality as influential, exposing "performative economism"—the rhetorical exploitation of economic issues without substantive action (Qodir et al., 2022). Distrust in political elites further amplifies polarization, as seen in South Halmahera, where skepticism deepens ethno-religious divides, creating an identity-distrust nexus absent in global frameworks like Recker's (2021). These findings underscore the need for context-sensitive approaches to understanding polarization in post-colonial societies.

Future studies should focus on the political polarization of Muslims in Eastern Indonesia (North Maluku, Maluku, West Papua) by exploring the role of religious institutions, local traditions, and colonial legacies. Comparative analyses could extend to other Indonesian archipelagic regions (Riau Islands, Central Sulawesi) and Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Southern Thailand, Mindanao), examining how historical conflicts and religious identities shape electoral dynamics. Additionally, research should investigate inter-religious and inter-ethnic polarization in multi-religious (East Java, Central Sulawesi) or multi-ethnic regions (North Sumatra, West Kalimantan), as well as specific cases from the 2024 Regional Elections, such as North Maluku or West Java. By understanding the impact of religious, historical, and economic factors on polarization, and developing context-sensitive depolarization strategies, future research can contribute to fostering pluralistic democracies that address identity, memory, and geography as interconnected forces.

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