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From Vote Buying to Turnout Buying: Clientelistic Network and Electoral Mobilization in the Border of Merauke, Indonesia

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Abstract

Studies on electoral patronage in Indonesia have highlighted the importance of material distribution and broker networks in voter mobilization. However, the relationship between the timing of reward distribution and the securing of support as reflected in final election outcomes remains under-examined. This article investigates this issue through a case study of candidates from migrant communities running for the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) in the 2024 election within the Merauke electoral district, South Papua. The research employs a qualitative methodology, incorporating case studies and in-depth interviews with candidates and their campaign teams. The findings reveal that political patronage operates through three primary mechanisms: the provision of personal gifts, the distribution of collective goods (*club goods*), and the mobilization of voter turnout (turnout buying). The *turnout buying* strategy extends beyond mere *vote buying* by more effectively engaging loyal voters in border areas a demographic typically characterized by political apathy. Clientelist networks formed through campaign teams play a crucial role in coordinating, distributing, and maintaining citizens' political loyalty. The study indicates that a candidate's success is influenced by financial resources, the ability to build trust-based social networks, ethnic connections, and effective voter-mapping strategies. Amidst the complex ethnic and social landscape of South Papua, patronage practices serve as an electoral mechanism while simultaneously reflecting the local power dynamics and socio-economic dependencies that shape patron-client political relationships. This study substantially enriches the understanding of clientelism-driven electoral politics in Indonesia's newly autonomous regions. It contributes to the field by elucidating the relationship between the timing of vote-related rewards and final election outcomes within the context of electoral clientelism.

Keywords: Patronage; Clientelism Network; Turnout Buying; Legislative; Merauke.

Introduction

Patronage and clientelism have long been dominant features in electoral political dynamics in Indonesia, especially in the context of legislative elections (Aspinall et al., 2011; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015). Since the era of direct elections, these practices have become increasingly entrenched in the political system, where the relationship between candidate and voter is based more on material transactions and pragmatic interests (Darwin, 2016; Kurniawan et al., 2018; Pratama, 2017). In practice, patronage is the provision of material and non-material resources by legislative candidates (patrons) to voters (clients) in exchange for electoral support (Adam et al., 2019). In this relationship, the patron provides resources and the client reciprocates the patron with political loyalty through voting or other endorsements. At the same time, the voice broker acts as an intermediary, transferring special benefits from the patron

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with political loyalty through voting or other endorsements. At the same time, the voice broker acts as an intermediary, transferring special benefits from the patron to the voter (Escobar, 2002; Lemarchand & Legg, 1972; Paskarina et al., 2019).

Patronage is a political strategy that distributes material and non-material resources through a clientelistic network. Voters in this network are given various incentives such as money, goods, and access to power in exchange for their votes (Andhika, 2018; Jati, 2022; Muhtadi, 2013; Samnuzulsari & Yudiatmaja, 2018). Increasing competition among candidates, both within and between political parties, is becoming more common. The open proportional voting system allegedly encourages legislative candidates to compete not only with opponents from other parties but also with other candidates from one party (Aminuddin & Ramadlan, 2012; Djuyandi. Yusa et al., 2024; Sinaga & Adam, 2021). Consequently, practices of patronage and clientelism such as money politics have become common tactics, as they are considered effective in securing votes and parliamentary seats.

Much of the literature on political patronage and clientelism focuses on the correlation between patronage and money politics in Indonesian electoral politics. Various studies on political patronage in electoral dynamics have established a correlation between political patronage and identity politics (Damanik, 2015; Husain, 2021; Jafar, 2015; Nashrullah, 2023). Some studies show that patronage works through networks of ethnic, ethnic, clan, and family-based clientelism to mobilize voter support (Chandra, 2006; Warganegara & Waley, 2021, 2024; Wilson, 2013). A number of other researchers have focused on the relationship between patronage strategies and the practices of political brokers in electoral politics (Adhinata, 2019; Kurniawan et al., 2017; Tawakkal et al., 2017; Yanti et al., 2023; Aspinall & Mas'Udi, 2017; Misra et al., 2021). Overall, these various studies demonstrate that understanding patronage requires attention to the material incentives and social relationships that underpin it. Networks, loyalty, and social identity help explain how patronage is organized and translated into political support.

The use of political patronage and clientelist networks by political actors to win elections has attracted considerable scholarly attention in studies of Indonesian politics (Allen, 2015; Jati, 2022; Samnuzulsari & Yudiatmaja, 2018). Candidates frequently employ patronage and clientelism as electoral strategies (Aspinall et al. 2017), particularly under the open-list proportional representation system, which encourages them to seek personal votes (Muhtadi 2019b, 2019a). This strategy encourages candidates to develop personal networks and leverage their resources to gain voter support, often through tangible direct contributions, such as money or public goods (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015).

Studies on the politics of patronage and clientelism in Papua have devoted much attention to political patronage highlighting the rivalry among local elites during governor, mayor, and mayor elections (Haryanto et al., 2019; Mietzner, 2007; Suryawan, 2011). Some scholars focus on electoral politics by examining the dynamics of political conflicts that affect political polarization, thus influencing horizontal conflicts and identity politics (Fatoni, 2020; Kogoya & Nurmandi, 2015; Pamungkas & Triindriasari, 2018). The problem that needs to be explored is how patronage and clientelism networks work and distribute resources to mobilize voters in legislative election contests. So, how can candidates from immigrant communities mobilize resources, build networks and win voter votes in constituencies in Papua's border areas. This study aims to address research gaps on patronage among legislative candidates or local actors in utilizing networks and resources, particularly in new expansion areas during the 2024 Merauke Regency Legislative Election, South Papua. The main focus of this study is directed at one legislative candidate or political actor from the immigrant community who managed to win a legislative seat in Electoral District (Dapil) V of Merauke Regency, which includes Jagebob, Sota, Eligobel, Muting, Ulilin, and Naukenjerai Districts.

In the election for the Merauke Regency Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) held on February 14, 2024, 64 legislative candidates competed for four seats in Electoral District (Dapil) V. Based on the vote count data used in this study, Mdy from the National Awakening Party (PKB) secured 1,220 votes, placing second behind SMM from the NasDem Party, who garnered 1,333

votes. The other two elected candidates were LDP from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), with 966 votes, and MRM from the Gerindra Party, with 935 votes. These results established Mdy as one of the four elected DPRD members from Dapil V. The question arises: how did Mdy build and operate a clientelist network to distribute patronage and mobilize voters during the 2024 Merauke Regency DPRD election? This study answers the question by examining the recruitment of intermediaries (brokers), the utilization of social ties to reach voters, and the nature and timing of resource distribution. Our research also seeks to distinguish between vote buying the provision of rewards to influence the choice of candidate and turnout buying the provision of rewards to encourage voters to show up and cast their ballots. This distinction is crucial for understanding the objectives of material distribution and the role of intermediaries in linking support for a candidate to actual turnout at polling stations (TPS). The article argues that the role of patronage in Mdy's electoral success cannot be adequately explained solely through vote buying and the distribution of personal gifts. The mechanism highlighted here is the use of intermediary networks to convert established support into voter turnout through turnout buying in the period leading up to the vote. In this mechanism, social ties provide access to voters, intermediaries coordinate mobilization, and material resources are used to encourage supporter participation. Thus, this study contributes by explaining the relationship between social networks, the distribution of patronage, and the mobilization of voter turnout within the context of a local legislative election.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach to analyze the political strategies used by political actors during legislative elections in electoral district V of Merauke Regency, South Papua, Indonesia. Instrumental case study model is used to gain an understanding of interesting phenomena in political phenomena. On the other hand, this case study is used as a methodology and strategy to collect data. In this study, the Mdy case is used to understand the organization of patronage and voter mobilization in the 2024 Merauke Regency DPRD Member Election. The unit of analysis is individual candidates, with attention to the candidate's relationship with campaign coordinators, brokers, and voters. In this study, it was chosen to explore how social networks and resources are used in electoral mobilization. Meanwhile, the concepts of patronage, clientelism, vote buying, and turnout buying are used as an analytical framework to interpret the actions of actors and the relationships between them. The research was directed to assess how the mechanisms described by these concepts play out in the case of Mdy.

Data collection was carried out in March–May 2024 through in-depth interviews and documentation review. In-depth interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information reconstructing the process of network formation, strategy formulation, and resource distribution during the election period. Snowball sampling was used for data collection, involving the identification of informants through interconnected references. This technique was chosen to engage individuals with relevant and extensive knowledge of the research topic. The identification of informants began with Mdy as the initial informant, then continued to the campaign coordinators who were referred based on their involvement in voter mobilization. The interviewed coordinators included one person each from Sota, Muting, Ulilin, Naukenjerai, and Eligobel Districts, as well as two people from Jagebob District, making a total of nine informants. The semi-structured interview method allows for flexible data exploration while maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of informants, particularly campaign staff, thereby maintaining research ethics and participant comfort.

The data analysis in this study relates to a pre-established framework consisting of three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and formulation and verification of conclusions (Miles et al., 2014). Data from observations and interviews were analyzed to identify patterns of patronage and strategies for building clientelist networks, with particular attention to how these networks supported candidates' electoral strategies. The data were systematically and interpreted

through descriptive narratives to examine power dynamics, patron–client relationships, and the use of political resources. Conclusions were drawn by assessing whether the evidence supported a connection between broker networks, resource distribution, and voter mobilization, while also considering accounts that challenged this explanation.

Results

Dapil V Merauke in the Border Region

Merauke Regency is a strategic area located at the eastern tip of Indonesia, currently serving as the administrative center of South Papua Province. Merauke, which covers an area of 46,791.63 km², is the largest district in Indonesia and an important focal point for the development of border areas in economic, geopolitical, and socio-cultural dimensions. Merauke's position on the border with Papua New Guinea and its designation as a transmigration zone since the New Order period have facilitated interaction between indigenous peoples or OAPs and migrants, local customs and modernity, as well as the interests of the state and local communities. Merauke Regency consists of 20 districts: Kimaam, Ilwayab, Tabonji, Waan, Okaba, Tubang, Ngguti, Kurik, Malind, Anim Ha, Merauke, Semangga, Tanah Miring, Naukenjerai, Sota, Muting, Jagebob, Elikobel, and Ulilin. The vast and diverse Merauce region makes it one of the districts with the greatest socio-political complexity in eastern Indonesia.

The Merauke people exhibit complex and diverse characteristics. Indigenous communities, including Malind, Kanum, and other local ethnic groups, uphold strong kinship values and have a spirituality strongly related to land and nature. The influx of migrant groups from various archipelago regions, including Java, Sulawesi, Maluku, and Nusa Tenggara, has formed new social dynamics that affect the economic, political, and demographic framework in Merauke Regency. Based on the explanation of the Merauke Disdukcapil in 2023, the number of OAP residents was recorded at 25,532 people spread across 22 districts throughout Merauke district (portal.merauke.go.id, 2024). Meanwhile, there were 55,108 non-OAP people (sirios.papuaselatan.go.id, 2025). This complexity directly affects the political dynamics in Merauke, especially related to the general election. The challenge of the legislative election marks the competition for electoral authority.

Political contestation took place in different social environments in Merauke Electoral District (Dapil) V, which includes border districts such as Jagebob, Sota, Naukenjerai, Ulilin, Muting, and Elikobel. Based on field observations, it shows that in the districts of Sota, Naukenjerai, and Eligobel, indigenous Papuan OAPs are the most dominant community in local social life. Meanwhile, the districts of Ulilin, Muting and Jagebob, see transmigration settlements that show OAPs and non-OAPs side by side which shows the lives of people with diverse backgrounds of regional origin. However, the socio-political character of these regions is greatly influenced by local issues, especially related to access to the rights of indigenous peoples (Franky, 2016), agrarian conflicts (Adiansah et al., 2021), economic inequality between indigenous Papuans and migrants (Adam & Ilham, 2023). Legislative candidates often use these issues as campaign materials and political mobilization tools. Overall, the contestation in Dapil V Merauke is not only a struggle for legislative seats but also a reflection of the struggle between modernization and tradition, between the aspirations of local communities and the direction of regional policies.

As well as field observations and informant statements Dapil V Merauke has a diverse ethnic background including local ethnic groups such as Kanum, Malind, Yei, and Papuans from outside Merauke, including Biak and Serui, as well as transmigrant groups from Java, Maluku, Bugis-Makassar, and East Nusa Tenggara. This ethnic diversity results in a diverse political landscape that is often influenced by social identities and historical relationships between groups. Residents of Meraucke's Electoral District (Dapil) V exhibit diverse livelihoods influenced by geographical conditions, social structures, and access to economic resources, along with their diverse ethnic and cultural identities. The transmigrant populations comprising ethnic Javanese, Makassar, and

East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) ethnicities are largely dependent on agricultural and plantation industries. Agriculture is a major source of livelihood, supported by extensive land use in areas such as Muting, Elikobel, and Ulilin. Over time, several micro-enterprises, including food stalls, grocery stores, and workshops, have evolved into providers of household energy needs such as kerosene and diesel. Some are even involved in the provision of clean water to local communities, demonstrating adaptation to regional needs and easily accessible economic opportunities (Hapsari, 2016).

Communities on the border, both local and migrant, also have an attachment to the environment through hunting and fishing activities. Animals such as deer, fish, and kangaroos become part of their daily lives, both for family consumption and for sale on a small scale (Sultani et al., 2022;Untari et al., 2021). These activities do not only reflect survival strategies. Diversity of livelihoods does not only reflect the adaptation of communities to the conditions of large and relatively remote areas.

In the political context, a person's economic background is often one of the factors that shape political preferences, especially when issues of welfare, agricultural subsidies, access to infrastructure, and government assistance programs are used as campaign materials by legislative candidates (Kompas, 2024). Four seats are allocated to the Merauke V constituency, which is small in number, but winning seats in this constituency is not easy. Road access to residential areas is limited, and some villages can be reached by land and river. Meanwhile, 64 legislative candidates are vying for four DPRD seats in Merauke V Constituency, where all candidates are new candidates who will compete to win voter votes.

Institutionally, this open proportional system is expected to encourage individual accountability of legislative candidates to constituents, strengthening the direct relationship between representatives and voters (Ayu Pratiwi, 2018; Sulaiman & Rohaniah, 2023). However, in practice, especially in areas with social characteristics such as Merauke, the institutionalization of this system faces quite complex challenges. In Dapil V Merauke, a candidate's popularity, sociocultural proximity, and logistical ability are often more decisive than party platforms or ideologies. This phenomenon routinely encourages individualistic, even transactional, campaigns, where direct aid distribution, program promises, and pragmatic approaches take precedence over debate of development ideas or visions. This approach becomes more prominent in the context of border communities such as in Dapil V Merauke due to limited access to political information and inequality of development between regions.

Regional Expansion and Opportunity Structure of Legislative Candidates

Mr. Mdy's emergence as a legislative candidate for the National Awakening Party (PKB) in Merauke Regency's Electoral District V reflects a political journey that evolved through a horizontal trajectory. His background as a local entrepreneur and legal practitioner, combined with his involvement in various social activities, laid the groundwork for accumulating the social and political capital necessary for the electoral contest. These experiences fostered a rapport with the grassroots community while reinforcing his legitimacy as a public figure attuned to social issues. Mr. Mdy's decision to run for office was driven by his ability to gauge the political climate and identify existing electoral opportunities. The creation of the South Papua Province was viewed as a strategic moment that opened up a new competitive arena, particularly given the potential for elite mobility to a higher level of governance, such as serving on the Merauke Regency Regional House of Representatives (DPRD). In the interview, he explicitly stated his motivations:

> "The desire to run in the legislative election is driven by concern over various issues facing the community; it also presents an opportunity, as South Papua has developed and there is a possibility that incumbent council members will shift to the Regency-level Regional House of Representatives (DPRD)." (Mdy, Interview on April 1, 2024).

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This statement shows that the calculation of the election not only drives the political decisions taken, but also the moral impulse and social unrest over the condition of the community. On the other hand, the contestation of the legislative election in Merauke Regency, South Papua, including in the Merauke V Constituency, is also filled with the issue of high political costs. This is reflected in the statement of a legislative candidate who revealed:

> "To enter parliament, I need a lot of capital and courage to fight in Dapil V Merauke. If we do the math, I face a huge political cost because this district is very difficult to reach, especially since I am a newcomer who has not been in contact with the community. Our opponents are senior candidates from other parties who have been in the world of practical politics for a long time" (Political Actor "M", Interview on April 2, 2024).

This statement shows that contestation in Dapil V Merauke requires an accurate electoral strategy and significant financial strength, especially to reach remote areas with limited infrastructure. In addition, his Bugis ethnic background and his family's experience in trading activities are the main source of social and economic capital for Mardiansyah in the legislative political contestation in Dapil V Merauke. As he revealed:

> "My father, a trader by profession, has been working back and forth in the Muting, Ulilin, Jagebob, and Naukenjeray areas for many years. In addition, there are many families or migrants from outside whom my father often helps there."

Through these economic activities and social networking networks, his family built trust and solidarity in various communities, which were then reproduced as important political resources in supporting his candidacy. However, Mr. Mdy also faced various challenges, including the contest arena that was not his demographic base and the dominance of senior politicians who had previously built a support base in Dapil V Merauke. This situation shows how a candidate's trajectory can be shaped by a combination of personal experience, social engagement, and response to the ongoing structural political dynamics, especially in the context of the formation of South Papua Province. Thus, the expansion of South Papua Province becomes a *new opportunity structure* that is at stake in the legislative election competition in Dapil V Merauke Regency, which opens up space for political mobility for new actors such as Mr. Mdy.

Political Network of Clientelism in Dapil V Merauke

Dapil V of Merauke Regency is one of the electoral districts that exhibits the dynamics of highly competitive political competition. The constituency includes a district area that has a plural demographic character, with a voter configuration spread between indigenous and migrant communities. This social complexity creates a contest arena that is determined not only by the power of political parties but also by social, informal, and patron-client networks that are deeply rooted in the community. Competition is increasingly fierce due to the limited number of contested seats, while the number of candidates running is relatively high; on the other hand, several local figures from Indigenous communities who have a strong mass base compete and demonstrate their strength in the Merauke Dapil V contest. These local actors compete in popularity and ability to distribute patronage resources, build networks of clientelism at the village and RT/RW levels, and play cultural and religious symbols that resonate with voter identities. In this context, the clerical strategy is one of the main instruments that local actors use to strengthen their electoral positions. Political actors build political infrastructure to win voter support by forming a network of successful teams. As expressed by local actors as follows:

> "This team is very important to achieve victory, but instead of calling it the success team, we prefer to use the term Work Team. The main task of this Work Team is to ensure the victory of Mr. Mdy the PKB Party Candidate" (L, Interview on April 2, 2024).

Mr. Mdy, as the candidate from PKB Party for the Merauke Regeny DPRD Number 2 from Dapil 5 said:

> "In the formation of the Working Team, the backgrounds of the members are very diverse. They consist of extended family members, especially from the Bugis community, who are traders, Javanese colleagues who are also traders, Javanese colleagues who work as farmers or farmers, Javanese colleagues who are community leaders, and NTT colleagues who work freelance." (Mdy, Interview on April 2, 2024).

Thus, the members of the Work Team do not come entirely from the core family environment. Instead, they have a strong social, cultural, and professional relationship with Mr. Mdy. This relationship is the basis for building a strong commitment to political cooperation to support success in the election competition. This was expressed by local actors as follows:

> "Because this is my first experience as a legislative candidate in Dapil V, I feel that I have to form a solid team with a vision that is in line with mine. In forming this team, I made a lot of considerations because in Papua, the political costs are quite high. Therefore, I have to choose a team that I trust. For example, in Jagebob District, my team is my best friend. In Sota, there happens to be a family that wants to get involved. In Muting and Ulilin, I entrust the mantri and the foreman. Many people from Eligobel and Naukenjerai also offered, but I need to test first how loyal and trustworthy they are." (L, Interview on April 2, 2024).

In forming a political network in Merauke's V constituency, personal relationships and trust are essential in recruiting local actors who function as campaign teams or *brokers* (Stokes et al., 2013). The selection of confidants from family, friends, and colleagues from different ethnic communities is a strategy to ensure political support remains consolidated and controlled at the grassroots level. Although the recruitment of a work team or *vote broker* does not only come from top-down decisions made by candidates, it also often arises through citizen initiatives that see potential political benefits in these relationships. As expressed by the coordinator of the campaign team in the Naukenjeray District (initials "Mrs ST"):

> "I offered myself to Mr. M. At that time, I came to his house to borrow money for the needs of my sick son. Because I knew he was a candidate in Dapil V Merauke, I immediately offered to help as a working team in Naukenjeray District." (Mrs. ST, Interview on April 21, 2024).

This statement reflects how the formation of patron-client relationships in clientelistic networks often begins with everyday interactions based on economic or social needs, which then evolve into more structured political relationships. This suggests that informal interactions such as lending money or other assistance are often the starting point for the formation of clientelistic networks (Justesen & Manzetti, 2023). These relationships are transactional and provide opportunities to access what was previously inaccessible to citizens by joining a successful team, which then becomes a clientelistic network formed by local actors. Thus, the existence of campaign teams or *brokers* can be said to play a central role in building and reproducing clientelism networks (Cahyati & Luter Lopo, 2019). Campaign teams or *brokers* connect political elites and grassroots communities and act as agents of political resource distribution as well as guardians of voter loyalty.

The Role of Political Network Clientelism

By winning the legislative election in Dapil 5 of Merauke Regency, the establishment and operationalization of the Working Team to support Mr. Mdy's. shows the strong characteristics of the practice of political clientelism. Clientelism is an exchange relationship that is personal, hierar-

chical, and oriented towards direct rewards between patrons, in this case political actors and clients. First, the organizational structure of the Work Team shows a pattern of direct and personal relationships between candidates and team members. As emphasized in interviews with local actors:

> "All the Work Teams are under my command, so whatever they need, all communication is done directly with me." (Interview on April 14, 2024).

This local actor-centered coordination model asserts that the loyalty of team members is not institutionalized through formal political parties but is inherent in individual candidates. This is typical of clientelistic relationships, where personal dependency is more dominant than formal organizational structures. Second, the background of the members of the Work Team, consisting of family, cultural ties (such as Bugis, Javanese, NTT), traders, farmers, and professional clients, indicates the existence of informal social networks as the basis of informal political organizations. These relationships are based on emotional closeness, previous employment relationships, and communal identities. In clientelism, this relationship base is commonly used to build more personal and stable political ties. Third, adaptation to the social conditions of the community as voters, such as low literacy rates in certain districts, is also responded to with pragmatic and direct approaches, such as the use of image-based properties and voting simulations. As expressed by local actors as follows:

> "I chose the PKB party with serial number 1, and Mdy serial number two... To make it easier, we together with the work team made a property for the simulation of voting ... because the contours of the people in this district still do not know how to read, they only know photos, technically this is a problem for me and the work team, especially since the ballot does not display the candidate's photo." (Interview on April 14, 2024).

This strategy reflects the practice *of indirect vote-buying*, where the provision of assistance in the form of "cognitive assistance" as a way to understand how to choose the candidate to be chosen at the time of voting is part of an investment to build electoral loyalty in voters who have limited information. Taking into account these three aspects, the personal relationship between political actors and the work team based on informal social networks as well as the use of pragmatic strategies in dealing with voter limitations. It can be concluded that the formation and management of the Working Team reflects a relatively strong practice of clientelism. Clientelism not only serves as a winning strategy, but is also a key mechanism in maintaining the cohesion, trust, and effectiveness of communication between candidates, the work team, and the voter base at the grassroots level.

Clientelism networks play a central role in mobilizing voter participation, through which a reciprocal relationship is established between political actors (patrons) and voters (clients), where political support is exchanged for material benefits. Through this network, local actors as patrons do not need to deal directly with each voter but rely on the loyalty of team members or intermediaries who already have strong social influence in their communities. However, the main challenge faced by political actors in Dapil V is their lack of popularity as candidates, which affects their level of electability among citizens. As expressed by political actors as follows:

> "The main challenge I face as a candidate is not only the low level of popularity, but also a non-technical problem. In this case, the saying 'don't know, don't love' is very relevant. When people don't know me, they don't have the closeness or interest to support me. However, the next challenge is technical. Once I was known face-to-face and quite popular in this field, another obstacle arose: many people didn't know my full name, the name of the party I represented, the parts number, and the colors, including my serial number on the list of candidates." (Interview on April 1, 2024).

This situation suggests a gap between symbolic proximity, recognition of legislative candidate figures, and electoral identification, which includes full name, serial number, party, skin color, and party symbols. Even if a candidate has established social relationships at the grassroots and is personally recognized by society, the expected vote can fall into the hands of other candidates without proper recognition of their electoral attributes. It also impacts their electoral eligibility. However, technically, ballots do not provide many markers, such as a photo of the candidate displayed on the paper, but rather a party logo, party name, candidate serial number, and full name.

Seeing this, clientelist relationships are not only based on emotional or social closeness but also require concrete and memorable political identification instruments, especially at the voter level with low political literacy, as happened in Dapil V Merauke . Failure to fully convey the identity of a political candidate has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of clientelistic networks, as voters may not be able to associate the numbers they are familiar with with the correct choice on the ballot. As a result, clientelistic systems formed by political actors demand technical campaign strategies. The popularity of local figures through voting techniques such as distributing business cards, conducting voting simulations, and visualizing party affiliations alone is not enough to ensure a direct connection to the vote. As explained by the success team from Muting District as follows:

> "Here, the task of the work team is to capture and collect the identity card, then the team, I take it to Mr. Mdy's house, where the data will be cross-checked again by the team." (BP, Interview on April 20, 2024).

As explained above, the collection of identity cards by the work team shows how the political support base is built through an administrative approach. By collecting these official documents, the team successfully maps out potential voters and creates a tighter form of social control over the masses. This is a form of voter identification strategy in which personal documents such as identity cards become an important tool for monitoring the political loyalty of the voter base. This suggests that the clientelism network allows for more efficient and scalable management of political support, as the relationship between patrons, intermediaries, and clients is structured in a hierarchical and layered scheme (Azhar, 2019). Indeed, networks of clientelism play a role in disseminating information about candidates, arranging ID card collection, forming reciprocal-based political commitments, and ensuring mass attendance on election day. This practice makes the voice of the electorate something that can be "guarded" and "claimed" by a successful team through social mechanisms bound by a sense of debt, trust, or even social pressure.

This condition highlights the difference between symbolic proximity defined as personal recognition of a legislative candidate and electoral identification, which involves key markers such as the candidate's full name, serial number, party color, party color, and party emblem. Although a candidate may have established grassroots connections and gained a level of personal familiarity within the community, electoral support can still be shifted to another candidate in the absence of effective socialization and public recognition of electoral attributes, especially those represented on the ballot. For example, campaign teams often conduct community outreach by distributing mock ballots, introducing legislative candidates, and disseminating information about party numbers, candidate numbers, and voting procedures. These kinds of efforts increase voter awareness of a candidate's position on the ballot and facilitate more informed electoral choices.

Mechanisms & Strategies of Distributive Political Campaigns and Mobilization

In the momentum of the Merauke V legislative election, political patronage is distributed in various ways, such as giving money in exchange for citizens' identity cards wrapped in the form of socialization of candidates who will be elected. This modus operandi has become a strategy for

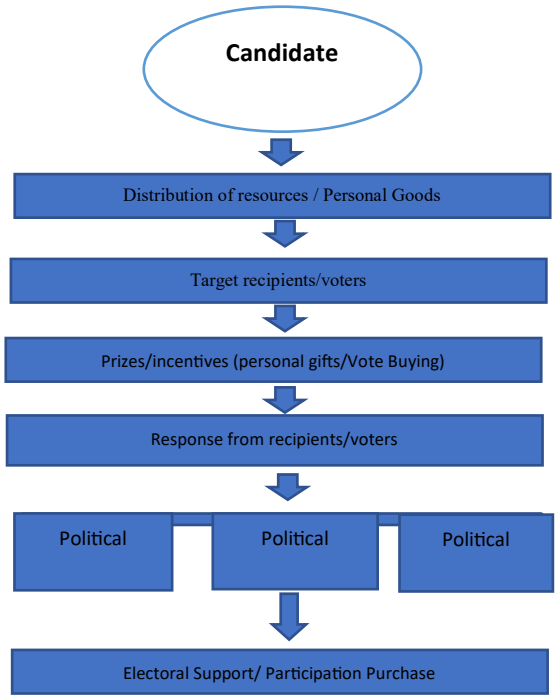
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local actors and work teams to gain support from voters. As expressed by one of the successful teams in Naukenjerai:

> "We conduct a door-to-door campaign with business cards that contain information about Mr. M - from his party name, his party number, to his serial number. We also simulate how to vote. Each identity card is worth Rp50,000. Since there are usually three family cards in a house, I can get five to seven identity cards from one house. We hand over the money directly and make sure they vote for Mr. M on the day of voting." (Interview on April 23, 2024).

The campaign team's statement above illustrates how money politics is organized through clientelist networks. Door-to-door canvassing no longer serves merely as a strategy for political outreach; it has become a channel for directly distributing cash incentives in exchange for political support. In this case, the candidate's business cards and mock voting exercises function as symbolic instruments that cultivate and reinforce voters' commitment to the candidate. The allocation of IDR 50,000 per identity card, with cards gathered collectively from several heads of household living in a single residence, indicates that vote buying is conducted systematically on the basis of population data rather than sporadically. Clientelist networks play a central role in this process, with campaign team members acting as political brokers who mediate between the candidate and voters, managing reciprocal relationships that are transactional yet couched in the language of social closeness. These practices demonstrate that relations between the candidate and citizens are built through direct exchanges grounded in short-term economic needs.

Figure 1. Graph of Patronage Distribution and Voter Mobilization



Source: Author's Conceptual Framework

Personalized Gifts

Of course, the giving of goods and the payment of money to individuals and communities also occur. One of the most common mechanisms of personal giving is during the campaign period. In practice, these gifts are routinely given to community groups. Personal gifts such as

cash assistance, financing of social activities, or direct donations to small groups and communities are a clear form of patronage practices in the Dapil V competition.

> "We adjust donations or assistance to the community according to the situation. For example, if some young people want to hold a football competition, we first look at their amount and commitment. If it makes sense and is not expensive, I will help. But like in Jagebob, someone asks for an irrational rice field tractor. The cost is large, while the amount is small." (Mr. Mdy, Interview on April 25, 2024).

The above statement describes how private gifts are used selectively and based on political calculations. This suggests that private giving is not just charitable but a strategy that considers the calculation of voter participation. In the patronage approach, the relationship between the candidate and the voting community is transactional and hierarchical. The candidate acts as a protector who controls the distribution of resources, while the community acts as a client who must demonstrate the potential for reciprocity, i.e. political support. Gifts such as funding a football competition are considered 'reasonable' because they are low in cost and reach large communities with electoral potential.

In contrast, the demand for heavy agricultural equipment in the Jagebob region was rejected because the number of voters was small and not worth the cost. This shows that personal good is not based on the principle of necessity but on electoral rationality. This practice can be seen as a form of patronage in which candidates do not bribe individuals personally but provide collective facilities or assistance to gain group loyalty.

Buying Votes into Turnout Buying as a Tool of Mobilization in Elections

Voter mobilization is one of the key aspects of election contestation, especially in areas with limited resources and infrastructure. In the context of the legislative election in Dapil V of Merauke Regency, the pattern of patronage distribution plays an important role in determining the success of local actors, especially when the candidate is not from the local area or is not widely known by the public. In practice, voter mobilization relies on communication and socialization strategies and involves logistical support for members of the work team. As expressed by local actors as follows:

> "Every work team will of course be seized in due course. When the team was introducing me as their preferred candidate, since they started looking for people, we gave them travel allowances and food." (Interview on April 14, 2024).

This statement suggests that the relationship between the candidate and the work team does not take place entirely in a voluntary space, but rather is built on certain forms of incentives, both material and symbolic. Logistical support, such as money for transportation and consumption, is part of the 'social compensation' for the time and effort spent by the team, reflecting the logic of political patronage. The form of distribution of resources carried out by local actors to the team is successful in the hope of gaining electoral support in return. In this case, the provision of travel money and food is not a direct practice of money politics, but rather a strategy to facilitate *the mobilization of votes* by supporting loyal and active social networks. It also shows that logistics are an integral part of the winning strategy in the context of regions such as Merauke, which have large geographical areas and varying levels of political participation. The work team not only shapes public opinion but is also important to ensure the smooth distribution of information and control over votes on the ground. Thus, logistical support to the work team is not only a form of appreciation for their political work, but also part of a systematic strategy to bind loyalty and ensure the effectiveness of voter mobilization at the grassroots level.

In Electoral District V of Merauke Regency, the challenges of voter mobilization are strongly shaped by the social, economic, and cultural conditions of local communities. The account provided by Ms. ST, a member of Mdy's campaign team, indicates that efforts to mobilize voters in this

area face several major obstacles that require more adaptive and effective campaign strategies. These challenges are illustrated in the following quotation:

> "Because Mr. M is a candidate from outside this area, we introduce him to voters by distributing business cards bearing his political party's name, his full name, and his candidate number. Since many people cannot read, we address this challenge through outreach to help them get to know their chosen candidate" (Interview on May 2, 2024).

This statement shows that the challenge of literacy is a decisive factor in the voter mobilization strategy at the grassroots level. The distribution of business cards that display visual elements such as party logos and serial numbers is a form of adaptation to local conditions that still face literacy limitations. This strengthens the understanding that participation *purchasing strategies in* the region cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context that surrounds voters (Nichter, 2008). In addition, in door-to-door campaign activities, members of the Work Team give cash to voters in exchange for voting commitments. Each identity card (KTP) is worth Rp50,000, with one house generating five to seven ID cards. This practice is explained in the following interview:

> "Each ID card is worth IDR 50,000. We hand over the money directly, and make sure they vote for Mr M on voting day." (Work Team, Interview on April 23, 2024).

This is emphasized by political actors as follows:

> "This is a calculation, sir. Some candidates prepare funds between Rp150,000 to Rp500,000 per vote. I prepared Rp250,000, in addition to the Rp50,000 identity card fee, so the total is Rp300,000 per person. But I give Rp250,000 after voting. We calculate how many votes go in at the polling stations in each village, and that's what we pay." (Mr. Mdy, Interview on April 25, 2024).

This shows a pragmatic and structured approach to money politics based on rational calculations and efficiency of campaign spending. This pattern reflects the practice of participation buying as a strategy to mobilize voters to come to the polls and vote for a particular candidate, with the promise of compensation given collectively and post-fact. Participation buying differs from conventional vote buying, which is usually individualized and done before the election. In this context, giving money is not only conditional but also collective. Candidates do not need to know exactly who voted for them, but rather simply monitor votes at the polling station level to demonstrate successful mobilization and loyalty. This strategy increases the efficiency of campaign spending and reduces the potential for wasting funds on disloyal voters.

Moreover, this scheme shows how transactional politics developed in a more pragmatic and calculating form. The statement "this is just a matter of calculation" suggests that the voters' vote has been reduced to a unit of value that can be converted into economic logic. In this case, vote is not just a political expression but an electoral commodity subject to the laws of supply and demand. This form of participation buying also shows a dimension of indirect social control. Since payments are made based on aggregate votes in villages or polling places, there is an incentive for communities to 'unite' in choosing to accept collective payments. This situation creates horizontal pressure among the population and allows local political actors or successful teams to organize and monitor voting behaviour informally.

Discussion

This study contributes to the academic understanding of the politics of patronage and clientelism in legislative elections in Indonesia. The dynamics of vote-buying practices in the

border region of Merauke is a unique and interesting phenomenon when compared to general patronage politics in Indonesia. In this specific geographical and social context, voter participation buying has proven to be much more effective as a voter mobilization strategy than vote buying. It can be said that this strategy aims to motivate voters who already have preferences but are reluctant to vote, without trying to influence their choices.

This phenomenon contradicts some studies that associate electoral patronage with vote-buying strategies, which are considered key strategies for legislative candidates to win seats in the legislature (Aspinall et al., 2011; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015). Vote buying has been defined in various studies as a direct material transaction between a candidate and a voter to influence political preferences or win the votes of undecided voters. Meanwhile, voter participation buying is a form of electoral clientelism that involves the giving of material gifts with the main goal of increasing the number of voters present at the polling station (Nichter, 2008). Therefore, participation buying differs from vote buying in that the focus is not on changing political preferences, but rather on mobilizing voter participation. In the case of Merauke, voter participation buying operates on a different logic, which is an attempt to increase voter participation from a segment of voters who are already committed but have a low level of electoral loyalty.

In theory, this practice is in line with the distinction made by Gans-Morse et al. (2009) and Nichter (2008) between vote buying and participation buying, where incentives are provided not to change voters' preferences but to ensure their participation in elections, especially among potential support bases. In this context, incentives are directly related to the number of votes as a measure of the success of political mobilization that transform the electoral process into a results-driven transactional arena. Therefore, the practice of political money manifesting as *participation buying,* as described above, is inseparable from the logic of clientelism the reciprocal relationship between candidates (patrons) and voters (clients) that is personal, transactional, and often non-institutional. This relationship model also describes how political transactions occur in an informal yet systematic framework, involving negotiations, calculations, and even "unwritten social contracts" between political actors and the voting community. Often, these relationships are short -term (lasting only during the campaign period). However, these relationships can continue regularly in subsequent election cycles, thus creating a community's structural dependence on political patrons as a source of material benefit, especially in economically marginalized areas.

Several structural factors in Merauke's geographical context, particularly in border areas including Electoral District V, explain why vote-buying is a more rational and effective strategy.

First, geographical conditions, poor transportation infrastructure, and limited access to information create a situation where voters often ignore the election cycle, even if they have ideological motivations or political preferences. This is in contrast to metropolitan urban areas in Indonesia, where the level of political involvement is relatively higher.

Second, low voter literacy is the biggest challenge to political participation and preference. Third, the economic structure of border communities. The dominance of the informal sector, subsistence agricultural economies, and hunting and gathering activities among indigenous Papuan communities which signal economic vulnerability create a context in which material incentives affect not only voter mobility but also grassroots participation. This condition suggests that vote-buying practices have an ambiguous side: on the one hand, they increase equality of political participation by encouraging the poor to vote.

The effectiveness of vote-buying depends on four conditions. First, a significant level of political apathy; second, the volatility of voters' preferences, which makes them vulnerable to mobilization; third, the tendency of voters in the subsistence economy to demonstrate political pragmatism; and finally, the ability of campaign managers to accurately identify target voters, which requires efficient grassroots mobilization supported by local knowledge and social capital.

This study confirms the idea that patronage operates not only through transactions but also as relationships embedded in social structures and informal institutions (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2015). The patron-client relationship built by Mr. Mdy involves not only

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only material exchange but also the provision of goods and services. In the context of Merauke, Mr. Mdy builds patron-client relationships not only on material exchange but also on the development and maintenance of deep-rooted and trust-based networks in geographical, ethnic, and employment contexts.

Theoretical evidence suggests that a candidate's financial resources do not always determine success in elections. When patronage functions solely as an exchange of goods and services, legislative candidates with substantial financial resources are bound to win. However, Mr. Mdy, who lacks significant financial resources, managed to obtain the second-highest number of votes with a significant vote margin. This shows that social capital, trust, and network efficiency are just as valuable as financial resources in electoral competition.

The campaign team formed by Mr. Mdy serves as an organizational infrastructure that performs three functions simultaneously: first, conducting political education and persuasion in a personal and context-relevant manner; second, building and maintaining a relationship of trust between candidates and voters; third, coordinating the efficient distribution of patronage resources based on sophisticated information regarding voter preferences and behavior. This structure is fundamentally different from the traditional intermediary-based patronage model, where the intermediary only serves as a channel that transfers benefits from patrons to recipients.

The electoral contest in Merauke's District V, marked by deep social divisions between indigenous Papuans (OAPs) and migrant communities, poses significant challenges in gaining voter support. Nevertheless, the work team also serves as a mechanism to overcome ethnic barriers in political cooperation. By involving members from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the work team, Mr. Mdy creates a structure that facilitates cross-ethnic political communication. This is a significant innovation because, as demonstrated in previous studies on Papua, ethnic divisions are often an obstacle that is difficult to overcome in electoral politics (Kogoya & Nurmandi, 2015).

Conclusion

This study examines the centrality of patronage and clientelelist networks in shaping electoral dynamics in Electoral District V of Merauke Regency, South Papua. Situated in a sociopolitical context characterized by demographic heterogeneity, complex inter-ethnic relations, and weak democratic infrastructure, patronage emerges as an electoral strategy as well as a power mediation mechanism between candidates and voters. Instead of relying solely on vote buying, candidates use a mix of personal gifts, club goods, and participation buy-ins to mobilize support especially effective in contexts characterized by political apathy.

The findings suggest that candidates from migrant communities can achieve electoral victories in indigenous-majority areas by building trust-based, emotionally close, and transactionally sustainable social networks. Political intermediaries play an important role in this arrangement, serving not only as intermediaries of resource distribution but also as guardians of electoral loyalty and guardians of voter mobilization.

In new autonomous regions such as South Papua, political openings allow for the emergence of new actors, but political competition remains shaped by informal social capital, logistical capabilities, and the ability to navigate the local sociocultural terrain. Information asymmetry, limited political literacy, and the importance of identity-based politics reinforce clientelealism as a pragmatic and adaptive strategy in a newly emerging and non-programmatic democratic landscape.

The study contributes to the literature on informal electoral institutions by showing how patronage and clientelism are contextually applied in fragmented political geographies. The study highlights a form of electoral democracy that, although informal and transactional, remains functionally effective under specific local conditions. These findings underscore the need for electoral governance reforms that are sensitive to local diversity, especially in post-decentralized and post-autonomy environments where formal institutions are still in consolidation.

The study was limited in scope, focusing on a single legislative candidate from a migrant

background in a single electoral district. Future research should adopt a comparative approach across multiple candidate profiles and electoral districts to better understand the variation in clientelistic practices. Moreover, although this qualitative analysis offers rich insights into informal political behavior, it does not capture how structural variables—such as education, income, and ethnic identity—shape voter responsiveness to patronage. Mixed methods or quantitative approaches are recommended to assess these influences systematically.

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