

Empty Box as Symbolic Action: Young Voters' Rejection of the Sole Candidate in Gresik's Local

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Abstract

This study explores the symbolic meaning behind the choice of the "empty box" (kotak kosong) among young voters in the 2024 regional election (Pilkada) in Gresik, where only one candidate was on the ballot. Rather than seeing this choice as political apathy, this research interprets it as a conscious act of resistance and a demand for genuine political representation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and symbolic interactionism theory, the study examines how young voters construct political meaning through their decision to vote for the empty box. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with informants aged 17–25 who reside in Gresik and intentionally voted for the empty box. The findings reveal that their decisions were shaped by critical reflection, peer discourse, and disillusionment with the lack of electoral competition. The act of selecting the empty box is understood as a symbolic expression of frustration, political identity, and expectations for democratic renewal. This study contributes by offering an empirical explanation of how symbolic political choices function as a form of youth resistance, a dimension rarely discussed in previous research on uncontested elections in Indonesia. It also provides a nuanced interpretation of the empty-box vote as a meaning-making process rather than a mere protest action.

Keywords: Empty box; Local election; Political expression; Symbolic interactionism; Youth voters.

INTRODUCTION

Regent elections (Pilkada) are a tangible manifestation of electoral democracy in Indonesia, allowing the public to participate directly in determining local leaders. This system gives the people the opportunity to exercise their right to vote directly, without intermediaries, as a form of

control over the direction of leadership in the region. Over time, the implementation of Pilkada has undergone a shift, particularly in terms of the number of candidate pairs competing. In the 2024 simultaneous Pilkada, 41 regions in Indonesia only had one candidate pair. This includes one province, 35 regencies, and five cities. This reality raises concerns about the decline in the quality of political competition at the local level. When political choices are limited to only one

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name, the space for participation becomes narrow and the opportunities for representation become smaller. In such conditions, the presence of a blank box is considered a legitimate alternative for voters who want to express their rejection of a single candidate. This option gives citizens the opportunity to continue to participate constitutionally, while expressing their disapproval of a political situation that they consider does not provide a viable choice. The choice of the empty box is not merely part of the technical mechanism of elections, but has developed into a symbol of citizen resistance to an electoral system that is considered uncompetitive (Irawan et al., 2024). Even traditional practices have become an arena for politicization when political figures use cultural rituals to introduce themselves in order to enhance their political image in society (Putri et al., 2025). This situation shows why it is increasingly important to conduct research that examines not only electoral outcomes but also how citizens interpret and respond to shrinking democratic space.

The phenomenon of empty box in the Gresik regional elections reflects significant developments in local politics. The emergence of support for blank ballots indicates public resistance to political domination that leaves no room for alternatives. This movement is not only a symbol of disappointment with the presence of a single candidate, but also contains a message of resistance against a political system that is considered to exclude fair public participation (Mahardika, 2021). The diversity of attitudes among young voters also shows that this phenomenon is not singular.

Some young people actively reject the empty box because they believe that this form of protest does not bring about concrete change. Meanwhile, other groups consider it an option that reflects disappointment with uninspiring political elites, as well as a strategy to disrupt the seemingly unchallenged dominance of power. In this case, young voters position themselves not as passive parties, but as social actors who are able to interpret political reality through shared experiences and social interactions. The choice to support or reject blank ballots reflects a collective construction of meaning formed through generational political awareness. These dynamics highlight the urgency of investigating young voters more deeply, because their interpretations are shaped by social experiences and cannot be generalized into a single pattern of political behavior.

Single candidate regional elections are closely related to the reality of local politics, which is often dominated by the pragmatic practices of political parties. This situation usually begins with the formation of a large coalition that combines the forces of the dominant parties in the Regional Representative Council (DPRD) to support a single pair of candidates, most of whom are incumbents (Firmansyah et al., 2023). This strategy is often used to strengthen positions of power, even though it sacrifices diversity of choice for the public. The space for competition, which should be at the heart of the democratic process, ends up shrinking because alternative candidates from smaller parties fail to gain sufficient access to run as challengers. The electoral process

becomes a formality, as the public is no longer presented with truly equal choices. In situations like this, the empty box appears as a form of expression for collective disappointment. For some voters, the existence of the empty box provides a way to reject without having to be passive. They make it a symbol of criticism of a closed system that only facilitates one flow of power. A study shows that the choice of the empty box is closely related to frustration with the lack of competition and weak diversity in local politics (Natasya et al., 2021). The increase in blank votes over time shows the public's tendency not to remain silent when their right to vote is indirectly restricted by an exclusive power structure (Andrian et al., 2024). Previous studies have shown structural factors behind the rise of empty-box voting, yet few have examined how individuals particularly young people interpret this political choice symbolically. This gap strengthens the relevance of this research.

The problem becomes even more complicated when young voters show a high level of engagement in exercising their right to vote for the empty box. This generation is not only present in terms of quantity on the voter list, but also in terms of quality in demonstrating a reflective political attitude (Septiani et al., 2025). Their choice of the empty box does not stem from ignorance or indifference, but rather from a critical assessment of the single candidate who is considered not to represent their hopes and interests. Voting for the empty box becomes a means of voicing rejection of a political situation that is considered closed and does not provide room for aspirations. Not merely a form of avoidance, this

decision reflects a collective awareness that the right to vote can be interpreted more broadly than simply choosing from the available names. Young voters often use the empty box as a symbol that they feel unrepresented by the choices provided (Mulyadi et al., 2024). Their presence at the polling stations is not merely a matter of fulfilling a constitutional obligation, but carries personal and social meaning for the choices they make. The courage to choose a different path demonstrates the capacity of young people as active, critical political agents who are not easily satisfied with the choices determined by the power structure. These patterns demonstrate why it is important to study how young voters construct meaning around the empty-box vote, a perspective that has not been sufficiently explored in existing literature.

The situation of a single candidate in regional elections, coupled with an increase in the number of voters choosing to leave their empty box, has serious consequences for political legitimacy. The existence of a single candidate tends to reduce the value of competition, which should be the foundation of a healthy electoral system. When the public has no viable alternatives, the election process becomes nothing more than an administrative ritual without any room for competition between ideas and programs. This condition weakens the function of democracy as a means of open selection. Trust in the electoral system is also eroded because the public feels forced to choose, rather than decide. An election format with a single candidate not only reduces the quality of competition, but also risks distancing the

public from the true meaning of participatory electoral democracy (Hannan, 2023). Voting for the empty box becomes a way for voters to legally express their disagreement. Declining participation does not always reflect apathy, but can be a symbolic form of dissatisfaction with the available candidates (Setiawan & Djafar, 2023). Young voters use this action as a form of active, even silent, political expression to reject a system they consider unrepresentative. When the space for choice is narrowed, the act of voting or not voting becomes meaningful. Elections are no longer seen only in terms of the final vote count, but also as a medium for voicing criticism of a process that does not provide real choices. This condition reinforces why studies focusing on symbolic forms of political expression are needed to understand how legitimacy is negotiated by voters, especially young generations.

Scientific studies that specifically discuss how young voters interpret their choice to empty box are still underdeveloped. Most studies tend to focus on legal aspects or participation statistics, while the social and symbolic dimensions of this action have not been widely discussed. The choice of the blank box is often seen merely as a consequence of the unavailability of alternative candidates, when in fact this decision can reflect a more complex narrative, including criticism of the political system, expressions of collective identity, and symbolic strategies in situations of limitation. (Rahmanto, 2018) emphasizes the importance of looking at the process behind this choice, rather than just stopping at the final vote count. The blank

box can be a channel for protest against the dominance of local elites or the strategy of large party coalitions that close off the space for competition. It has been noted that since 2015, the emergence of empty boxes has become part of the dynamics of political expression in society, including in the 2017 regional elections in Tebing Tinggi, where some residents used blank boxes as a form of rejection of the single candidate put forward by a large coalition (Muetya et al., 2022). A similar phenomenon also occurred among certain ethnic groups who felt politically unrepresented and used the blank box as a form of collective political stance. Patterns such as these show that the meaning behind the choice of the empty box is closely related to social experiences and identity awareness, especially among the younger generation. Therefore, an approach is needed that not only records participation rates but also understands how political meaning is constructed through symbolic interactions in the daily lives of young voters. This gap in previous research forms the basis of this study's novelty, namely exploring the meaning-making process among young voters using a symbolic interactionism approach.

This study offers a symbolic perspective in understanding the phenomenon of support for empty boxes in regional elections with only one candidate, with a particular focus on the dynamics occurring in Gresik. The symbol of the empty box is not merely interpreted as a neutral choice or a form of apathy, but rather as a space for articulating the political messages of the younger generation who feel

unrepresented. Through the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the act of choosing the empty box is understood as the result of a process of interpretation of the prevailing social and political situation. This choice arises from a convergence of meanings formed through ongoing experiences, discussions, and reflections among young individuals. This approach encourages analysis that does not stop at participation rates, but delves into how political meaning is constructed subjectively and shared collectively. Here, political voices are not only seen in the form of support for candidates, but also in the form of rejection communicated through certain symbols. This research not only records voter behavior patterns but also examines how unconventional forms of participation can be legitimate expressions in a democracy. Accordingly, this study aims to (1) identify how young voters in Gresik interpret their decision to vote for the empty box, and (2) analyze how these interpretations are formed through social interaction and symbolic processes. Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute new insights to the field of political participation by emphasizing symbolic dimensions that have been less explored in previous literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive study type. This approach was chosen to understand the meaning formed and experienced by young voters in choosing the empty box, particularly as a form of symbolic political expression in the single-candidate regional election in Gresik.

Qualitative research aims to explore in depth what happens in an event through the perspective of participants (Mouwn Erland, 2020). The research location was in Gresik Regency, East Java, because this area had experienced a regional election with a single candidate and showed significant involvement of young voters in choosing the empty box. The research was conducted from April to May 2024, adjusting to the time and readiness of the informants.

The data source comes from primary data obtained through in-depth interviews with fifteen key informants. Informants were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: (1) aged 17–25 years old during the regional elections, (2) residing in Gresik, (3) consciously choosing the empty box in the single-candidate regional elections, and (4) able to articulate their experiences and political views openly. The number of informants was expanded to fifteen to enrich the variation of experiences and provide stronger analytical depth, as earlier interviews indicated emerging differences in the way young voters interpreted their choice. Instead of solely aiming for complete data saturation, the addition of informants was intended to capture nuances and ensure that the patterns identified were consistent across diverse backgrounds. This range is also aligned with methodological recommendations for qualitative studies, which suggest involving approximately 12–20 participants to allow stable identification of patterns of meaning. The selection of informants was guided by theoretical considerations and empirical assumptions regarding their depth of

experience and relevance to the focus of the study.

Data collection techniques were carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method allowed researchers to explore informants' experiences and views more openly, while maintaining focus on the main research theme (Ardiansyah et al., 2023). The interview process was conducted flexibly, either through video calls or face-to-face meetings in places that were comfortable for the informants, such as cafes and faculty canteens. The relaxed atmosphere helped informants to be more open in sharing their experiences. In addition to verbal conversations, researchers also noted expressions, gestures, and non-verbal responses that arose during the interaction to capture a more complete social context and enrich the interpretation of the meaning conveyed (Mekarisce, 2020).

The data analysis process in this study followed the stages proposed by Miles and Huberman, namely: (1) data reduction, (2) data presentation, and (3) conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction was carried out by filtering and simplifying raw data through a process of coding and categorizing themes to identify relevant narrative patterns. Data presentation was carried out in the form of descriptive narratives that described the main findings, while conclusions were drawn by linking these findings to the theoretical framework used (Rijali, 2019). Data validity is strengthened through triangulation of sources and techniques, as well as reconfirmation of findings with informants (member checking) to ensure data accuracy and credibility (Birt et al., 2016). Triangulation

is a multi-method approach used by researchers when conducting research, collecting and analyzing data (Mckim, 2023).

This study uses the symbolic interactionism theory developed by Herbert Blumer to understand how individuals construct meaning through social interaction and symbols (Wahyudin, 2017). Blumer puts forward three main premises in this theory: (1) individuals act towards something based on the meaning that something has; (2) that meaning comes from social interaction with other people; and (3) that meaning is changed or modified through a process of interpretation carried out by individuals in that interaction (Rismahareni et al., 2018). Symbolic interactionism theory is used to explore how the choice of an empty box in regional elections is not only an electoral act, but also a symbol of the reflective political attitudes of the younger generation.

RESULTS

The choice to support the empty box in a single-candidate regional election does not stem from ignorance. Young voters who choose the empty box in a single-candidate regional election are not solely driven by ignorance or indifference. This choice arises from a process of critical thinking influenced by their real experiences in following local political developments that they consider unsatisfactory. When there is only one candidate, they see it as a sign that democracy is losing its meaning because there is no room for diverse choices and healthy competition. This situation is considered to weaken the function of

democracy as a means for the people to elect leaders who are truly capable of representing their interests. The empty box is not just an empty option on the ballot paper, but a symbol of protest that contains a message of rejection of the dominance of power that is unresponsive and lacks transparency.

When regional elections are held merely to fulfill administrative procedures without involving the true essence of democracy, deep disappointment arises among young voters. The loss of alternative candidates means that the public loses the opportunity to assess and compare different visions, programs, and leadership qualities. Many feel that the single candidate does not adequately represent the aspirations and needs of the community because the nomination process was not inclusive and was closed. The lack of options makes voters feel that their right to vote and criticize is limited. Voting for the empty box becomes a form of resistance that shows their disapproval of a stagnant political situation that offers no opportunity for change (Jamil & Burhanuddin, 2024).

Empty box are often seen as a symbolic means of communication with political parties and government elites (Syahid et al., 2024). The decision to empty box contains the hope that the candidate selection mechanism will be improved to be more open and participatory (Sari & Inkonsistensi, 2023). The message being conveyed is that the public, especially the younger generation, demands real involvement in the democratic process and does not want to be passive spectators. This critical attitude is also reflected in their efforts to

seek information and learn about the consequences if the empty box wins, showing that their decision is not a spontaneous reaction, but the result of careful consideration and social reflection that continues to develop in daily discussions and interactions.

The meaning of voting for an empty box is formed through a dynamic and ongoing social process. Discussions with peers, consumption of information from social media, direct experiences with public services, and involvement in discussions of local issues are important components in building this collective view (Hardianto & Pribadi, 2024). From a symbolic interactionism perspective, the meaning of the empty box does not only come from the physical box itself, but also from the symbolism that is built through social interaction and shared experiences. Regional elections become an arena for expressing political identity, demanding transparency, and voicing the desire for democracy to be more honest, open, and inclusive. This choice reflects a shift in political culture among young people, who are becoming more reflective and actively taking on roles in shaping the direction of governance.

The choice to leave the ballot blank when only one candidate is presented in an election should not be interpreted solely as a direct rejection of that candidate. Many young people use this as a different form of participation from the conventional method. They do not view their presence at the polling booth as merely a routine electoral ritual, but rather as an opportunity to convey a political message. Instead of abstaining or being apathetic, they choose to remain active voters, but choose not to support

any of the available candidates. This attitude reflects their hope for healthier, fairer contests that reflect the true spirit of democracy, where there are choices that are truly worthy of rational consideration (Kurniawan & Wawanudin, 2019).

Most young voters who make this decision do so after a process of careful consideration. For them, the empty box is not a meaningless void, but rather an alternative space to express opinions that cannot be accommodated through the existing candidate choices (Aziz & Ningrum, 2023). Behind this decision often lies a careful consideration process, where they examine the candidates' backgrounds, assess their commitment to change, and try to match them with the principles and values they consider important. When they feel that the available choices do not reflect their desire for real change, the decision to vote for the empty box emerges as a political expression that contains criticism, as well as concern for the direction of democracy.

The decision to vote blank can also be seen as an attempt to construct new meanings for political symbols that are often considered rigid (Saleh, 2020). Young people do not necessarily decide to withdraw from the democratic process when they are disappointed with the available candidates (Quinn, 2016). Instead, they respond to these conditions by using small loopholes in the system to assert a different voice. The empty box, which was previously considered only an administrative feature, is now given new symbolic meaning: as a representation of criticism, hope, and desire for change (Prasetya, 2023). When the space for participation feels narrow, this choice becomes an expression that combines

rejection and optimism. They hope that the voices they raise, even if they do not directly win seats of power, will still be heard as a signal that there is a segment of society that demands a political system that is more open to control and correction by its citizens.

DISCUSSION

The choice to vote for the empty box in a single-candidate regional election reflects more than just an administrative procedure regulated by the electoral system. This action did not arise out of nowhere, but was formed from reflection, social interaction, and collective interpretation of political dynamics at the local level. When political contests do not provide alternative spaces, voters do not simply give up, but instead look for opportunities for participation that can still be used to voice their opinions. The empty box is then treated as a legitimate symbol of protest, which can represent concerns about the lack of choice and representation. Young voters, who are still forming their political identities, often respond to this situation in a reflective and critical manner. They do not view participation in regional elections as mere political routine, but rather as a space to show their position, test the limits of the system, and assert that their votes should not be forced to submit to a single choice. This is evident from the statement of one informant who emphasized that they chose the empty box because they *"wanted a truly competitive option."* For this informant, the presence of a single candidate made the electoral process feel unhealthy for local democracy. Similarly, another informant expressed that the empty box was, for

them, *"a legitimate form of resistance,"* showing that the action was not merely an emotional response but a carefully considered political stance.

This kind of response also implies collective emotions of disappointment, fatigue, and cynicism towards a political process that is perceived as being overly controlled by certain elites (Tinuntung, 2014). For some voters, the empty box is the only channel still open to express their rejection of an election format that presents only one candidate. When political competition appears to be merely a formality, voting for the empty box sends a strong message to organizers and parties that the public does not accept a flawed mechanism (Ray et al., 2025). This message also reflects a desire to reopen a space for equal and meaningful participation. In their view, the empty box is not a sign of indifference, but a conscious expression deliberately used to disrupt a system that is considered too entrenched and unresponsive to the voice of the people. Several informants also affirmed that dissatisfaction with the sole candidate was a major reason for choosing the empty box. Informant 2, for instance, explained that A. Yani *"did not carry out his mandate fairly,"* making the empty box a way to signal disagreement. Meanwhile, another informant said that upon realizing there was only one candidate, they felt *"the democratic space was narrowing,"* which motivated them to vote for the empty box as a message that the public deserves alternatives.

The way people view the empty box reflects a shift in the relationship between citizens and the state. Young voters do not want to be seen merely as passive participants who are mobilized

during elections, but rather as political subjects with clear intentions and positions. Although many of them feel frustrated with the stagnant political situation, this feeling actually encourages them to engage in a more reflective manner. Emotions such as disappointment, confusion, or disgust do not hinder participation, but rather pave the way for a more critical form of political engagement. The empty box then becomes a symbol of political identity struggle, especially for a generation that wants to redefine the relationship between society and power (Hardiansyah, 2024). They not only want to fulfill their obligations as voters, but also fight for the right to consciously determine the direction of politics. One informant stated that voting for the empty box was *"a way to say that the available candidate does not match what people expect."* For this participant, the empty box was not just a blank option on the ballot, but a symbol indicating the need for a more suitable and qualified candidate. Another informant viewed the empty box as *"an active and critical political expression,"* especially for those who want to assert their political identity as voters who refuse to be easily controlled by existing power structures.

The critical attitude reflected in these actions shows that their involvement in elections is not merely a periodic administrative requirement (Aziz & Ningrum, 2023). Today's youth are increasingly aware that their votes are a tool for expressing their views on the quality of politics around them. They are not merely fulfilling their obligations, but also positioning themselves as actors who want to influence the direction of political

decisions at the local level. When the available choices fail to represent their will, the use of blank ballots becomes a way to reject a single force that is perceived as too dominant. They are not merely rejecting a figure, but also rejecting a system that does not allow for healthy competition. In such situations, they demonstrate their willingness to be citizens who are capable of critical thinking and determining their political stance autonomously. Social discussion also played an important role in shaping the decision to vote for the empty box. One informant mentioned that conversations with friends made *them* “even more certain about choosing the empty box,” as many of their peers also felt uncomfortable with the presence of a single candidate. Informant 7 even emphasized that they chose the empty box after discussing the issue and realizing that the action is “a valid and rational way to formally register objections.” The decision to still come to the polling station was also considered part of active participation, as expressed by an informant who stated, “I came because this is how I voice my stance.”

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that the decision of young voters to choose the empty box in a single-candidate regional election reflects a conscious and meaningful form of political expression rather than apathy or disengagement. The findings highlight three key aspects: young voters view the empty box as a symbolic protest against the absence of electoral competition; their choices arise from reflective judgment, peer discussions, and dissatisfaction with political domination; and the empty box

becomes a medium for asserting political identity and demanding more representative leadership.

Despite these insights, the research still has limitations. The study relies on qualitative data from fifteen informants, offering depth but limiting generalization to the wider youth population in Gresik or other regions. It also focuses solely on young voters who chose the empty box, excluding the perspectives of those who supported the single candidate or abstained from voting. Future studies could include comparative groups, involve a larger number of participants, or adopt mixed-method approaches to strengthen empirical coverage. Practically, the findings call for broader access to candidate nominations, improved political education for young voters, and more competitive electoral conditions. The act of choosing the empty box should be interpreted as a legitimate form of dissent and a demand for a more inclusive and responsive democratic process.

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