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# Money Politics in the Simultaneous Elections in Batu City: Networks, Practices, and Driving Factors

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**Abstract**
Money politics remains a serious challenge to the consolidation of democracy in Indonesia. Despite ongoing reforms to electoral institutions, vote buying and other material inducements continue to erode electoral integrity. This study analyzes the dynamics of money politics in the simultaneous elections in Batu City, East Java, a relatively prosperous region that no longer faces high poverty rates. To explain the persistence of this practice beyond economic factors, the study uses a qualitative descriptive approach through in-depth interviews with seven voters and two campaign team members. These are analyzed using interactive analysis, supplemented by direct observation and document review. The findings indicate that money politics manifests in four main patterns: vote buying, individual gifts, club goods, and pork barrels, which are carried out through patron-client networks involving campaign teams, neighborhood heads (RT/RW), religious leaders, and families. These patterns demonstrate that money politics operates through a combination of transactional relationships, relational closeness, and local institutional structures. Voter acceptance is not only rooted in short-term economic calculations but is also influenced by permissive social norms, transactional electoral traditions, weak oversight, and competitive incentives within an open proportional system. This study shows that money politics persists because it is integrated into social networks and institutional structures, not solely because of economic vulnerability, thus providing an empirical basis for revisiting the relationship between welfare, patronage practices, and electoral behavior in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Elections; Money politics; Patron-Client networks.

## INTRODUCTION

Money politics refers to the practice of using financial incentives to influence political outcomes and elections, including vote buying (Cantú, 2019; Gallego et al., 2023), pork barrel (Holmes, 2018; McAllister & Biddle, 2024; Thompson & Batalla, 2018), and public goods (Guillen & Komac, 2020; Horne, 2019; Sherlock, 2008) . Money politics is a multifaceted issue that is closely related to political clientelism (Haryanto, 2017; Thompson & Batalla, 2018), campaign financing(Sachsenröder, 2018), and corruption (Mutalib, 2017; Ufen, 2017). Money politics poses a significant challenge to democratic values and governance, with varying impacts in different countries, including Indonesia (Thompson & Batalla, 2018). The

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relationship between money and politics often leads to corruption and inequality, ultimately weakening the voting rights of the majority of citizens (Deschamps et al., 2021; Miller & Sifry, 2018) and undermining the principles of democratic elections (Posada-Carbó, 2008).

Money politics is a global phenomenon with varying forms and intensity. In New Zealand, campaign spending influences voter support (Johnston & Pattie, 2008), while in the United States, a candidate's success is largely determined by their ability to raise and spend campaign funds (Gierzynski, 2018; Miller & Sifry, 2018). In Kenya, vote buying is used to build candidate credibility and promise future benefits (Kramon, 2017). In Southeast Asia, money politics is closely linked to elite and party activities (Sachsenröder, 2018; Tawakkal, 2025; Yen, 2024) and encompasses various forms such as gifts, jobs, and material benefits (Aspinall, 2015; Ufen, 2017), both in individual (Guerra & Justesen, 2022) and collective (Gutiérrez-Romero, 2014) vote-buying schemes.

In Indonesia, money politics is a deeply rooted practice in national and regional elections (Adlin et al., 2022; Choi, 2004) and encompasses cash payments, digital currency, and politically motivated projects (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016; Fernando et al., 2024). The shift from moral legitimacy to capital legitimacy, reinforced by weak oversight (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019), has encouraged political pragmatism and unethical practices (Musa, 2020). Public tolerance has further broadened the acceptance of money politics (Al-Hamdi et al., 2025), and it is even considered customary in some communities (Kairupan et al., 2018). From an institutional perspective, the open proportional system increases competition between candidates (Kusumasari, 2020; Muhtadi, 2020; Prihatini, 2019; Virananda et al., 2021), encouraging personalistic strategies such as money politics (Komarudin et al., 2025; Risky et al., 2023). Socio-culturally, economic vulnerability (Adlin et al., 2022; Fatimah & Adnan, 2025; Thompson & Batalla, 2018; Wilkis, 2016), low political literacy (Adlin et al., 2022; De la Cuesta, 2023; Gherghina & Marian, 2024), social pressure (Megawati et al., 2025), and the tradition of gift exchange (Al-Hamdi et al., 2025) strengthen patron-client relationships through the role of brokers and local leaders (Fernando Bucheli, 2015; Simandjuntak, 2012; Ufen, 2017), resulting in relational clientelism (Higashijima & Washida, 2024; Yıldırım & Kitschelt, 2020).

However, despite these explanations, the persistence of money politics in relatively prosperous regions remains under-explored. Many studies assume that poverty is the main driver of vote buying, that poor voters are more vulnerable to financial inducements, and that candidates exploit their vulnerability (Adlin et al., 2022; Alfa & Marangos, 2016; Davies, 2021; Fatimah & Adnan, 2025) . However, empirical evidence shows that even in wealthier regions with relatively low poverty rates, money politics continues to flourish (Bonds, 2014; Widestrom, 2014) . Thus, although poverty remains a significant factor, the persistence of money politics in various contexts shows that institutional incentives and cultural norms play an equally important role. This is in line with the case of Batu City, where relative prosperity has not eliminated the practice of money politics.

Batu City, East Java, offers an important context for understanding the dynamics of vote buying in local democracy. Despite a relatively stable economy and a poverty rate that declined from 9,050 in 2016 to 7,890 in 2019, or approximately 3.8 percent of the total population (BPS, 2022), vote buying remained rampant during the 2019 simultaneous elections. A survey by the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) in Batu City showed that 27 percent of respondents directly accepted vote buying, while 62 percent were aware of the practice but did not report it (Rahman, 2019). Local media also highlighted allegations of vote buying, distribution of goods, and misuse of social assistance for electoral gain.

The paradox between increasing prosperity and the high prevalence of money politics raises questions about the factors that sustain this practice. Previous literature has largely linked money politics to poverty and voters' economic needs (Adlin et al., 2022; Alfa & Marangos, 2016; Davies, 2021; Fatimah & Adnan, 2025; Thompson & Batalla, 2018; Wilkis, 2016). However, the Batu case demonstrates that money politics also persists in contexts of relative prosperity, in line with research findings on the increasing commercialization of electoral processes in various developing countries (Deschamps et al., 2021). This suggests that non-economic factors contribute to voter vulnerability and candidate strategies.

Thus, this study explicitly asks three questions: (1) what forms of money politics emerged in the 2019 simultaneous elections in Batu City, (2) how did the networks of candidates, intermediaries, and voters organize and distribute these practices, and (3) what non-economic factors explain voter vulnerability in a high-welfare context. This study contributes to the literature on vote buying and clientelism by highlighting that money politics is not only supported by economic needs, but also by the structure of electoral competition, social norms, and the strategic calculations of political actors.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive design to explore the forms, networks, and driving factors of money politics in the 2019 Simultaneous Elections in Batu City, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because it is able to capture the complexity of social and political phenomena that cannot be fully explained through quantitative methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). By emphasizing subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations, this research allows for a deeper understanding of how money politics is perceived, practiced, and reproduced in the local context. The descriptive orientation also helps to document the phenomenon naturally without imposing rigid variables or categories.

The city of Batu, located in East Java Province, was chosen as the research location due to its unique socio-economic characteristics. Batu is known as a tourist city with a rapidly growing service sector and a relatively low poverty rate of only 3.8 percent in 2019 according to BPS data. However, reports from Bawaslu and local media indicate that money politics practices remain rampant in elections. This paradox makes Batu an ideal case for examining the non-economic factors that drive money politics. With a relatively manageable population and diverse electoral districts, Batu City also provides a practical framework for field research.

Data collection was conducted through a combination of primary and secondary sources to ensure methodological triangulation. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with seven voters from various electoral districts who admitted to receiving or witnessing vote buying practices, as well as two campaign team members directly involved in money distribution and campaign logistics. The researchers acted as observers and participants, engaging in limited community activities during the campaign period without taking part in political activities, allowing for more natural observations of social dynamics at the local level. Field observations were conducted throughout the campaign period and post-election to document ongoing practices directly. Secondary data were collected from official documents from the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the Elections Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), statistical publications from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), media reports, and relevant academic studies. This combination allowed for cross-validation between individual experiences, contextual observations, and institutional records.

The informant selection strategy used a purposive technique, taking into account the relevance of the information. Voters were selected based on three criteria: registered voters in the 2019 election, direct experience with voter money practices, and coming from different electoral districts to capture variations in local contexts. Two campaign team members were selected for their active involvement in campaign logistics and knowledge of voter money distribution mechanisms. Data analysis followed an interactive model (Miles et al., 1996), which consists of three stages: (1) data reduction, which is the process of identifying, coding, and simplifying important information; (2) data presentation, through organizing themes and patterns in an analytical matrix or narrative; and (3) drawing and verifying conclusions, which is the process of developing interpretations of the findings and checking them through source triangulation. Ethical considerations were upheld, including maintaining the anonymity of respondents and villages and obtaining consent for participation prior to interviews.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Money Politics Practices in the 2019 Legislative Elections in Batu City

Money politics has long been an inherent element of Indonesia's electoral dynamics. In legislative elections, this practice is not only understood as a violation of the law but has undergone a process of normalization at the societal level. For some voters, giving money or goods in the lead-up to elections is perceived as normal—even anticipated—thus blurring the line between illegal practices and accepted electoral traditions. Research findings in Batu City during the 2019 Legislative Elections indicate that money politics operates through a variety of actors, both incumbents and newcomers, with strategies tailored to voters' socioeconomic characteristics.

Interviews in four electoral districts revealed that the practice of money politics does not exist as a single phenomenon, but rather as a series of strategies reflecting an exchange relationship between candidates and voters. These include vote buying, personal donations such as basic necessities and religious supplies, club goods allocated to social or religious groups, and pork barrel projects initiated by incumbents through the use of public resources. The nominal amount of money given—generally ranging from Rp 50,000 to Rp 100,000 per individual—is combined with the basic necessities packages, which are considered effective as instruments for mobilizing support. These findings demonstrate that money politics operates as an adaptive and multi-layered electoral strategy, relying not only on short-term material incentives but also exploiting the structure of social relationships and candidates' access to public resources. Thus, money politics in Batu City reflects an institutionalized exchange logic, in which candidates and voters mutually understand and negotiate the value of these transactional relationships. The practice *of vote buying*, for example, was most prevalent in Electoral District I, particularly in the villages of Lesti and Pesarean. Narratives from voters in this region indicate that cash payments were usually made directly, even by visiting residents' homes. This strategy was also reinforced by the provision of basic food supplies to parents, who were then expected to influence the choices of all family members. This family-based targeting strategy shows that money politics does not only operate at the individual level, but also exploits domestic social structures to mobilize votes.

In Electoral District II, particularly in Sisir Subdistrict, the form of money politics is more complex. In addition to the distribution of money and basic food supplies, there are also *pork barrel* practices, such as road paving and water channel repairs. This form of money politics is unique because it can only be carried out by incumbent candidates who have access to public funds. The study found that the people of interpreted these projects as a form of concern on the part of the candidates, even though in reality these projects were part of the state's obligations funded by the regional budget. This practice reveals a manipulation of the function of representation: public aspiration programs that should be institutional in nature are personalized by candidates for electoral gain.

Meanwhile, in Electoral District III, money politics not only appeared in the form of *vote buying* and *pork barrel*, but also *club goods*. For example, one candidate provided cash for the purchase of tahlil congregation uniforms. This practice shows how money politics utilizes socio-religious networks as a channel for distributing votes. By targeting religious groups with high social cohesion, candidates hope to gain collective support from all members of the group. These findings are in line with previous studies that emphasize that money politics in Indonesia is not merely individual transactional, but often relational in nature, planting social bonds between candidates and communities (Tawakkal, 2025; Tawakkal et al., 2020) .

In Electoral District IV, the practices found were more similar to those in Electoral District I, namely *vote buying* and *individual gifts*. One respondent even emphasized that as a first-time voter, he directly received cash and food packages through informal distribution by local neighborhood association (RT) leaders and religious leaders. These findings indicate that first-time voters are actually the main targets of money politics, given their lack of political experience and their tendency to act as *floating voters* (De la Cuesta, 2023; Gherghina & Marian, 2024) .

**Table 1.** Forms of Money Politics in Batu City During the 2019 Legislative Elections

| No | Electoral District | Form of Political Money | Network |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Electoral District I** | | • Head of Neighborhood Association |
| | a. Lesti Village | *Vote Buying*: Money worth Rp 50,000 | |
| | | *Individual Gift*: Basic food supplies (sugar, oil, and noodles) | |
| | b. Pesarean Village | *Vote Buying*: Money worth Rp 50,000 | |
| 2. . | **Electoral District II** | | • Campaign Team<br>• Head of Neighborhood Association<br>• Village/Subdistrict Officials<br>• Worker Network<br>• Family Network |
| | Pasir Subdistrict | *Vote Buying*: Money worth Rp 100,000 | |
| | | *Individual Gifts*: Basic food supplies (rice, oil, sugar), prayer robes, sarongs | |
| | | *Pork Barrel*: Repair of water channels and paving of alleys | |
| 3. | **Electoral District III** | | • Campaign Team<br>• Head of Neighborhood Association<br>• Family Network<br>• Village/Subdistrict Officials<br>• Religious Leader (Head of the Tahlil Congregation) |
| | a. Pajero Subdistrict | *Vote Buying:* Money worth Rp 50,000 | |
| | | *Pork Barrel:* Road paving | |
| | b. Bejo Village | *Vote buying*: Money worth Rp 50,000 and Rp 100,000 | |
| | | *Club Goods:* Cash for purchasing tahlil congregation uniforms | |
| 4 | **Electoral District IV** | | • Head of Neighborhood Unit<br>• Religious leader (head of the tahlil congregation) |
| | Sumber Village | *Vote buying*: Money worth IDR 50,000 | |
| | | *Individual Gift*: Basic necessities (oil, sugar, tea) | |

**Source:** Data processed by researchers

From the entire electoral district, it can be seen that the distribution of money politics was not carried out randomly, but was highly structured. Money politics in Batu City showed a combination of individualized vote buying and collective vote buying (Guerra & Justesen, 2022; Gutiérrez-Romero, 2014) . At the household level, distribution is carried out personally through neighborhood associations or relatives. However, at the community level, distribution takes place collectively through religious forums or social organizations. This combination expands the reach of money politics while strengthening social pressure on voters to fulfill their promises of support. This social structure also serves as an important channel for distributing money and goods to voters with minimal risk. The fact that some sources reject money politics, even though they are few in number, shows that there is moral resistance at the community level. However, this resistance is not enough to reduce the massive scale of this practice.

From a political economy perspective, the practice of money politics in Batu City confirms that becoming a representative of the people requires enormous financial capital. A simple calculation shows that for one polling station with 500 voters, if each voter is given Rp50,000, at least Rp25 million is needed. With a target of 2,000 votes, the total capital that must be spent reaches Rp100 million just for *vote buying,* not including other forms of money politics. Such a large amount of political capital creates a strong incentive for legislators to engage in corruption after being elected, in order to recoup their political investment. Thus, money politics is not only a matter of electoral ethics, but also a gateway to the perpetuation of the cycle of political corruption (Sachsenröder, 2018; Ufen, 2017) .

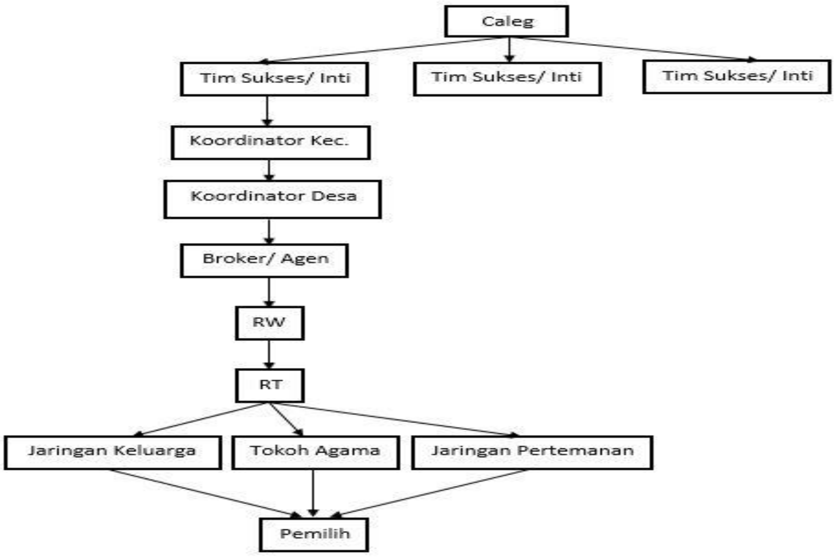
Findings from Batu City show that money politics in the 2019 elections was not only transactional in nature, but also relational and institutional. It is transactional because there is a direct exchange of money/goods for votes; relational because it involves social networks such as family, religious leaders, and local communities; and institutional because incumbents use public programs for electoral gain. This complexity shows that money politics at the local level cannot be understood merely as individual deviance, but as a social phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the political culture of society.

**Money Politics Networks in the Simultaneous Elections in Batu City**

The practice of money politics in Batu City during the 2019 Simultaneous Elections shows that the distribution of materials, whether in the form of cash or goods, cannot be separated from the role of structured social and political networks. Legislative candidates (caleg) are highly dependent on the existence of intermediaries, or brokers, who serve as liaisons between candidates and voters. These brokers are not merely conveyors of information about the candidates' vision, mission, and programs, but also key actors who organize, channel, and oversee the distribution of money politics at the local level.

In the literature, Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati divide voter mobilization networks in Indonesia into three main categories: (1) campaign teams or professional brokers, (2) social networks based on community, religious, and traditional leaders, and (3) political parties (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2016) . Field findings in Batu City confirm this typology, but also show that the most dominant dimension is not political parties, but rather the first two actors: campaign teams and community-based social networks. This confirms Burhanuddin Muhtadi's argument that in Indonesian electoral practice, party-based relationships tend to be weaker than personal relationships, which are more flexible, pragmatic, and adaptable (Muhtadi, 2020).

**Figure 3**. Structure of the Money Politics Network in Batu City




One of the most significant findings in Batu City is the direct involvement of RT and RW heads as the main intermediaries in the distribution of money politics. They are not only trusted to distribute money, but are also asked to compile a list of recipients, including attaching photocopies of their ID cards as proof. The existence of complete population data makes them very effective brokers. In interviews with voters in Electoral District 2, for example, one respondent mentioned that his father, who served as the RT head, was asked by the campaign team to distribute money and record who received it, thereby creating a mechanism for monitoring the conversion of money into votes.

This phenomenon is consistent with a Charta Politika survey which found that the actors most involved in the distribution of political money were campaign teams (45.2%) and neighborhood association (RT/RW) leaders (3.4%) (databoks, n.d.) . Findings from Batu City show that this figure is even more prominent, as voters often receive money through local figures whom they know, respect, and trust. Sociologically, this social closeness creates a kind of moral pressure for recipients to fulfill their promise of support on election day.

In addition to RT/RW, family networks have also been shown to play a role in the distribution of money politics. In Electoral District 3, one respondent admitted to receiving money from a campaign team that still had close family ties with him. This pattern shows that the practice of money politics does not only rely on formal structures or community organizations, but also takes advantage of intimate personal relationships. Family relationships are considered safer because of the high level of trust and low risk of information leaks.

From a clientelism perspective, the use of family networks shows that money politics is not always impersonal. Instead, it is embedded in existing social networks, thereby facilitating mobilization. This phenomenon also reflects what is known as relational clientelism, where patronage is distributed through more intimate social ties rather than simply one-time transactions (Higashijima & Washida, 2024; Yıldırım & Kitschelt, 2020) .

Another interesting finding is the use of religious forums as arenas for the distribution of money politics. For example, in Electoral District 4, a respondent revealed that money was distributed by an RT chairman to female congregants after a tahlilan (prayer) activity. This practice indicates that money politics is not only a hidden transaction, but can also be carried out collectively in social spaces that have moral legitimacy.

The use of religious forums reinforces previous findings about how patronage politics in Indonesia often operates through community institutions, rather than just formal political channels (Haryanto, 2017) . This strategy shows that money distribution is not only efficient, but also wrapped in a more socially acceptable atmosphere. This phenomenon also shows that candidates prefer to rely on personal networks that are considered more flexible and loyal. The implication is the strengthening of political personalization and the erosion of the representative function of parties as democratic institutions.

In addition to social networks, campaign teams play a very central role. They are usually formed in layers, starting from regional coordinators, village team leaders, to volunteers at the neighborhood/community association level. In practice, campaign teams collaborate with traditional leaders, religious leaders, community leaders, and community organizations to expand the reach of political money distribution.

Interestingly, the winning strategies between candidates vary. In Electoral District 2, for example, one candidate implemented a "One Village" program by assigning one volunteer to oversee ten heads of families. Meanwhile, in Electoral District 3, the strategy used was "TPS-Based Victory," which involved forming small teams in each neighborhood association to ensure a majority of votes at each polling station. These strategies not only demonstrate a variety of tactics, but also show how money politics is institutionalized into a systematic campaign structure.

Furthermore, incumbent candidates have their own advantages by utilizing access to aspiration funds. By channeling development programs to their voter base, they strengthen their reputation and create reciprocal obligations that stick to the community level. This phenomenon shows the close link between state-based patronage and electoral money politics, which results in a cycle of local elite reproduction.

**Drivers of Money Politics in the Simultaneous Elections in Batu City**
**Internal Factors**

Unlike other regions in Indonesia where acceptance of money politics is generally associated with weak economic conditions (Adlin et al., 2022; Fatimah & Adnan, 2025), the context in Batu City exhibits a different dynamic. Interview findings in several electoral districts indicate that most voters accept money politics not because of poverty, but rather based on short-term economic rationality. In the 2019 Election, cash gifts from legislative candidates were perceived as instant benefits without immediate risk. This is reflected in informants' statements: "Who wouldn't want free money? Another 100,000... enough for shopping" (Interview, November 5, 2021) and "I received money from several candidates... of course I chose the one who gave more" (Interview, November 2, 2021).

This acceptance indicates that money politics is viewed as a practical economic strategy rather than a consequence of structural economic limitations. Thus, rational economic calculations are the primary internal factor explaining the continued practice of money politics in Batu City.

Beyond economic considerations, low political education is also a significant factor. Political education encompassing an understanding of the electoral system, citizenship rights, and the long-term impacts of money politics remains very limited. Interviews with first-time voters revealed that ignorance about candidates makes them more susceptible to material rewards: "I accepted the money because I honestly don't know anything about politics" (Interview, October 30, 2021). This lack of political literacy fosters pragmatic and apathetic behavior, consistent with previous findings that formal knowledge alone is insufficient to reduce the intention to accept money politics (Megawati et al., 2025).

Another internal factor is the deeply rooted culture of money politics in society. This practice is considered commonplace and even passed down from one election to the next. Local terms such as NPWP (Nomor Piro Wani Piro) and Golput (Golput) demonstrate the normalization of money politics in electoral culture. Interviews in Pesarean Village even revealed that legislative candidates who don't give money are perceived as unworthy of being elected, even if they possess integrity (Interview, October 30, 2021). This normalization results in electoral legitimacy based on material transactions, rather than candidate quality.

**External Factors**

Beyond internal factors, several external factors reinforce the continued practice of money politics. First, the design of an open proportional electoral system increases the intensity of competition among legislative candidates, both inter-party and intra-party. In this situation, money politics is seen as the most effective and efficient strategy for gaining quick support. This was emphasized by a campaign team member: "Unhealthy competition has led many legislative candidates to resort to money politics... the quickest way to gain support is through money" (Interview, December 19, 2021). Another source added that almost all legislative candidates use money politics as a survival strategy in the competition (Interview, December 20, 2021). Thus, a competitive electoral system creates structural incentives for candidates to rely on material transactions (Komarudin et al., 2025; Risky et al., 2023).

The second external factor is weak law enforcement and oversight. Survey data from the Batu City Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu) shows that 27% of voters consider money politics normal, while 62% are aware of the practice but are reluctant to report it. This condition creates a culture of silence that weakens the effectiveness of oversight. The case in Electoral District 3 demonstrated a personal relationship between an incumbent legislative candidate and a Panwaslu member through the provision of gratuities, reflecting a form of micro-level state capture. When supervisory institutions lose their independence, detection and enforcement of violations are suboptimal. This finding aligns with literature confirming that weak sanctions and oversight are the main causes of the recurrence of money politics in every electoral cycle (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that money politics in the 2019 Simultaneous Elections in Batu City was not a direct consequence of poverty, but rather the result of a complex interaction between voters' economic rationality, permissive cultural norms, and institutional incentives created by the open proportional system. Various forms of money politics, ranging from vote buying to pork barrel projects, demonstrate that this practice has been institutionalized through patron-client networks involving diverse local actors. These findings contribute to the literature by demonstrating that in a context of relative prosperity, money politics persists as a dominant electoral strategy driven by relational and structural mechanisms, not simply economic factors. Therefore, efforts to reduce money politics require electoral system reform, strengthening the capacity and independence of oversight institutions, and ongoing political education to foster public resistance to this transactional practice. Conceptually, this study broadens the understanding of money politics as a multidimensional phenomenon in developing democracies, while practically providing a basis for designing more effective policy interventions.

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