

Dalihan Na Tolu in the Dynamics of Toba Batak Identity Politics in the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Dalihan Na Tolu in shaping the dynamics of Toba Batak identity politics during the 2024 Regional Head Election (Pilkada) in Pematangsiantar City. It aims to analyze the models of identity politics and the factors influencing the transformation of Toba Batak identity politics throughout the electoral process. This study employed a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 informants, including Toba Batak community members involved in the election, traditional leaders, religious leaders, punguan (clan associations), political party representatives, academics, and non-Toba Batak residents. The data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, while data validity was ensured through triangulation. The analysis was guided by theories of identity politics, political culture, political behavior, and the concept of regional head elections. The findings reveal that Toba Batak voters in Pematangsiantar City are no longer predominantly influenced by clan identity. Instead, their political preferences are increasingly shaped by religious identity politics and material-based political considerations. The emergence of rational-cultural voters and the growing influence of Christianity have further reduced the traditional role of clan affiliation in electoral decision-making. In addition, the findings indicate that public trust has fostered multicultural values amid the evolving political landscape. Overall, this study demonstrates a weakening of the traditional role of Dalihan Na Tolu in the dynamics of the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City.

Keywords: *Dalihan Na Tolu; Identity Politics Dynamics; Toba Batak; Regional Head Election; Pematangsiantar City*

A. Introduction

Dalihan Na Tolu is the fundamental philosophical foundation of the Toba Batak ethnic community that governs both individual and collective socio-cultural life. Rooted in the historical and cultural traditions of the Toba Batak people, this philosophy is based on the concept of the “Three-Legged Stove” (*Tungku Nan Tiga*), which symbolizes social balance and kinship harmony. It consists of three interrelated principles: *Somba Marhulahula* (showing respect to the wife-giving clan), *Elek Marboru* (protecting and nurturing the wife-receiving clan), and *Manat Mardongan Tubu* (maintaining harmonious relationships among members of the same clan). These principles constitute the foundation of the Toba Batak kinship system and function as an important marker of social identity. Consequently, clan affiliation is not only embedded in the socio-cultural life of the Toba Batak community but also influences political orientation and voting behavior during elections, particularly in local electoral contests where ethnic identity

frequently functions as an important source of political mobilization (Faisal et al., 2025; Fitri et al., 2025).

Previous studies have documented the persistence of identity politics in electoral contests. Lumbantoruan and Amal (2025), for example, examined the role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* in the dynamics of local politics during the 2021 village head election in Lumban Julu Village, North Tapanuli. Their study found that voters' electoral preferences were strongly influenced by the moral authority of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, with traditional leaders and *hula-hula* (wife-giving clans) playing a significant role in shaping political decisions. Similarly, Saputra et al. (2025) demonstrated that Batak identity politics, particularly through the Simarmata clan, significantly influenced voting behavior in the 2023 village head election in Situnggaling Village, Merek District, Karo Regency. These findings suggest that electoral preferences were largely shaped by traditional cultural values in which clan identity remained the primary basis for political choice. Recent studies have also shown that electoral behavior in Indonesia has increasingly been influenced by candidates' political communication strategies, social legitimacy, and public engagement, indicating that identity politics alone is insufficient to explain contemporary voting behavior (Marcella et al., 2025).

Despite these important contributions, limited attention has been given to how *Dalihan Na Tolu* has evolved within contemporary urban Toba Batak communities, particularly in the context of the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*). Existing studies predominantly emphasize clan identity as the principal determinant of political preference, while the interaction between traditional kinship values, religious identity, and rational political considerations remains insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the evolving dynamics of Toba Batak identity politics in Pematangsiantar City and examines how these transformations have reshaped the role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* and electoral preferences during the 2024 *Pilkada*. Specifically, this study addresses two research questions: (1) What models of Toba Batak identity politics emerged during the 2024 *Pilkada*? and (2) What factors have influenced the transformation of *Dalihan Na Tolu* in shaping voters' electoral preferences?

Clan affiliation constitutes the core of the *Dalihan Na Tolu* social structure and serves as an inherited marker of identity through the paternal lineage (patrilineal system). Prominent Toba Batak clans include Silalahi, Hutapea, Siallagan, Simamora, Simangunsong, Sinaga, Sianipar, Napitupulu, Tambunan, Pangaribuan, Sianturi, Sitio, and Siahaan, among many others. Traditionally, this kinship system is expected to encourage individuals to support mayoral candidates who share the same clan lineage. However, the political behavior of Toba Batak voters in urban areas such as Pematangsiantar demonstrates a different pattern. Rather than relying primarily on clan affiliation, many voters increasingly prioritize candidates' moral integrity, leadership capacity, campaign performance, and material considerations, reflecting broader changes in voter behavior observed in recent Indonesian local elections (Fitri et al., 2025). This transformation has reshaped both electoral preferences and political attitudes. In addition to clan identity, Christianity represents another important component of Toba Batak identity. According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS) of Pematangsiantar City, approximately

139,961 residents identified as Christians (Protestant and Catholic) in 2024 (BPS Kota Pematangsiantar, 2025). Within Toba Batak society, Christianity is not merely a religious affiliation but also a moral framework that complements traditional Batak cultural values and has become deeply integrated into the philosophy of *Dalihan Na Tolu*.

Similar transformations have been identified in contemporary studies of Indonesian electoral politics, where traditional identity increasingly interacts with rational political considerations and democratic participation (Yunita & Albana, 2025). While Toba Batak communities continue to uphold customary norms and cultural traditions, voters simultaneously exercise political autonomy based on personal moral judgment and rational considerations when selecting mayoral candidates. This phenomenon can be analyzed through Rational Choice Theory proposed by Anthony Downs and the sociological approach to voting behavior developed by Lazarsfeld, particularly regarding the influence of religious affiliation on political preferences. These theoretical perspectives provide a useful framework for understanding the changing political behavior of Toba Batak voters during the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City.

The Toba Batak constitute one of Indonesia's largest ethnic groups and originally inhabited the inland regions of North Tapanuli Regency, including Humbang Hasundutan, Toba, and Samosir. Over time, socio-economic pressures and the pursuit of better livelihoods encouraged large-scale migration to various parts of North Sumatra, including Pematangsiantar City. This migration gave rise to permanent urban communities that maintained strong kinship ties through *punguan* (clan associations). Toba Batak people are also widely recognized for their distinctive communication style, characterized by directness, assertiveness, and strong public speaking skills, qualities that frequently facilitate their participation as candidates in regional electoral contests.

According to Yasser and Alfi (n.d., as cited in Guna et al., 2026), a Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) is a democratic electoral process through which citizens directly elect governors, regents, and mayors from candidates nominated by political parties, coalitions of political parties, or independent candidates who meet the legal eligibility requirements.

Indonesia has consistently conducted democratic elections, including Regional Head Elections (*Pilkada*) in 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2024. Electoral campaigns have become an integral component of democratic competition, serving as strategic instruments through which candidates communicate political ideas, persuade voters, mobilize electoral support, and construct political legitimacy among diverse voter groups (Hasanudin et al., 2023; Marcella et al., 2025).

During the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City, four candidate pairs competed for the office of mayor. They consisted of Wesly Silalahi and Herlina (Candidate Pair No. 1), Mangatas Marulitua Silalahi and Ade Sandrawati Purba (Candidate Pair No. 2), Susanti Dewayani and Ronald Darwin Tampubolon (Candidate Pair No. 3), and Yan Santoso Purba and Irwan (Candidate Pair No. 4).

The presence of several candidates sharing similar ethnic and religious backgrounds created a unique electoral setting in which voters were required to consider factors beyond primordial identity. This context provides an opportunity to examine

whether the traditional influence of *Dalihan Na Tolu* has remained dominant or has gradually shifted toward more rational, religious, and pragmatic considerations in contemporary urban politics.

B. Literature Review

According to Agnes Heller (as cited in Rahman, 2020), identity politics refers to political ideas and movements that position identity differences as the primary basis of political struggle. From this perspective, a political group may consist of individuals from diverse backgrounds, yet they are united by a shared identity that shapes their collective goals and political orientation.

Identity politics exerts both direct and interactive influences by fostering the formation of ethnic and religious identities, which subsequently contribute to broader processes of social transformation. Political interests based on shared racial, religious, ethnic, or gender identities are prioritized within the political arena, a phenomenon commonly referred to as identity politics (Sukmariningsih & Mashari, 2023). Furthermore, Syamsurrijal et al. (2022, as cited in Faisal et al., 2025) argue that the dynamic interaction between national interests and local aspirations has become one of the defining characteristics of identity politics in Indonesia. This interaction may function in either complementary or contradictory ways, depending on the prevailing political context.

According to Huntington and Nelson (1994), political behavior refers to the ways in which citizens attempt to influence governmental decision-making. Such behavior is shaped by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include political awareness, educational background, and historical experience, whereas external factors encompass public policies, economic conditions, and interactions with other social groups (Fitri et al., 2025). Within the context of Regional Head Elections (*Pilkada*), the study of political behavior also focuses on voting behavior. Three major theoretical approaches are commonly employed to explain voting behavior: the sociological approach, the psychological approach, and Rational Choice Theory.

Previous studies have predominantly examined *Dalihan Na Tolu* through a sociological perspective emphasizing ethnicity and cultural identity. This perspective assumes that cultural values and clan affiliation remain the dominant determinants of electoral preferences among the Toba Batak community. In contrast, the present study adopts a broader analytical framework by integrating Rational Choice Theory, a religion-based sociological approach, and the perspective of multiculturalism. These complementary perspectives emphasize rational decision-making, moral considerations, and pluralistic values as important determinants of voting behavior. Consequently, they provide a more comprehensive explanation of the evolving dynamics of Toba Batak identity politics during the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City.

The multiculturalism perspective proposed by Charles Taylor is grounded in the concept of the politics of recognition, which argues that recognizing cultural diversity is not merely a moral imperative but also a prerequisite for building an inclusive and stable democratic society. In pluralistic settings such as Pematangsiantar City, the recognition

of diversity plays a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion while preventing the domination of majority groups over minority communities. Rather than treating diversity as a passive social condition, this perspective emphasizes its active incorporation into democratic processes. Through this approach, the state facilitates dialogue among identity groups while encouraging structural changes that foster mutual recognition and strengthen public trust among diverse communities (Yunita & Albana, 2025).

C. Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings and experiences underlying the role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* in the dynamics of Toba Batak identity politics during the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Pematangsiantar City. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researchers to explore social phenomena within their natural context and to interpret participants' perspectives comprehensively.

The study was conducted in Pematangsiantar City, North Sumatra Province. This location was selected because the political preferences of the Toba Batak community in Pematangsiantar exhibit distinctive characteristics compared with those of other regions where electoral behavior remains more strongly influenced by traditional clan affiliation and customary values. The transformation of political preferences observed in this urban setting provides an appropriate context for examining the changing role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* in contemporary local politics.

The study utilized both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected directly by the researchers through field observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Secondary data were obtained from relevant sources, including books, government reports, scholarly journal articles, publications from Statistics Indonesia (BPS), and other supporting documents (Naamy, 2019).

The interviews and focus group discussions were conducted primarily in Bahasa Indonesia, with occasional use of the local Batak dialect when participants expressed themselves more naturally in their native language. All interview excerpts presented in this article were translated into English by the researchers for publication purposes. The translated quotations were carefully compared with the original transcripts to preserve semantic equivalence and cultural meaning during interpretation, as recommended in cross-language qualitative research (Abfalter et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2024).

The participants consisted of Toba Batak community members who took part in the election, traditional leaders, community leaders, representatives of *punguan* (clan associations), political party representatives, academics, and non-Toba Batak residents. A total of 20 informants participated in the study, comprising 15 men and 5 women, aged between 22 and 60 years. They represented diverse occupational backgrounds, including entrepreneurs, traders, business owners, *sintua* (church elders), private-sector employees, and university students.

The informants were selected using purposive sampling, whereby participants were chosen according to predetermined criteria relevant to the objectives of the study. The primary informants were Toba Batak community members who participated in the

2024 Regional Head Election. Key informants included traditional leaders and community leaders, while supporting informants comprised representatives of *punguan*, political parties, academics, and non-Toba Batak residents. These participants were selected because of their direct involvement in the electoral process and their ability to provide rich insights into the dynamics of identity politics examined in this study. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of approximately one month.

All data collection and analysis were conducted directly in the field within participants' natural social settings, reflecting the exploratory nature of this qualitative inquiry. Data were analyzed inductively to identify recurring patterns and construct meanings from the empirical findings. The analytical procedures followed the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Since this study employed a qualitative design, no statistical analysis was performed (Lumbantoruan & Amal, 2025).

To ensure the credibility of the findings, this study employed triangulation as the primary data validation technique. According to William Wiersma (as cited in Naamy, 2019), triangulation refers to the process of verifying data through multiple sources, multiple data collection techniques, and different periods of data collection. Accordingly, this study implemented source triangulation, methodological triangulation, and time triangulation to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

D. Results and Discussion

Models of Toba Batak Identity Politics in the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City

The findings reveal three predominant models of Toba Batak identity politics that influenced the role of *Dalihan Na Tolu* during the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Pematangsiantar City.

1. Clan-Based Identity Politics

Dalihan Na Tolu gives rise to a model of clan-based identity politics, in which clan affiliation (*marga*) serves as the primary cultural identity of the Toba Batak people and is inherited through a patrilineal lineage system. Prominent Toba Batak clans include Silalahi, Hutapea, Siallagan, Simamora, Simangunsong, Sinaga, Sianipar, Napitupulu, Tambunan, Pangaribuan, Sianturi, Sitio, Siahaan, and many others. The clan system functions as a mechanism for strengthening kinship ties, social solidarity, and collective political identity among Toba Batak people, particularly in local electoral contexts where ethnic identity remains an important mobilizing resource (Septiarani & Pasha, 2025). Within the context of regional elections, clan affiliation has traditionally served as an important reference in determining electoral preferences.

Previous studies have demonstrated the dominance of clan identity in electoral politics. Lumbantoruan and Amal (2025), for instance, found that *Dalihan Na Tolu* strongly influenced local political dynamics during the 2021 village head election in Lumban Julu Village, North Tapanuli. Likewise, Saputra et al. (2025) reported that Batak clan identity significantly affected political communication and voting behavior during the 2023 village head election. In contrast, the present study indicates that clan affiliation

no longer constitutes the primary determinant of political choice in the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City.

This transformation is reflected in the statement of one of the key informants, Mr. Sahat Napitupulu, a traditional leader:

"A clan is a person's identity. For example, someone with the surname Napitupulu is Batak, Chaniago is Minangkabau, while Tarigan and Ginting are Karo. A clan is like a chromosome or DNA because it identifies one's lineage and ancestry. That is what makes it unique and irreplaceable. Likewise, Dalihan Na Tolu is the ultimate foundation of customary law and serves as the basis for all Batak traditional ceremonies, such as marriage, baptism, and funeral rituals. Every customary ceremony must involve the hula-hula, tulang, opung, bonaniari, bonatulang, and hula-hula maranggi. In regional elections, clan ties remain very strong, but in reality, material considerations also play an important role." (Interview, April 24, 2026)

The interview and field observations indicate that clan affiliation continues to strengthen kinship and social solidarity among the Toba Batak community. Beyond its role in customary ceremonies and marriage, clan identity also establishes long-standing cultural bonds between voters and political candidates. However, the findings reveal an important anomaly: material considerations increasingly compete with traditional clan loyalty, creating a crisis in the traditional role of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. This finding supports the perspective of identity politics grounded in primordialism while simultaneously reflecting the explanatory power of Rational Choice Theory.

2. Religious Identity Politics

Religion, in its broadest sense, refers to an individual's beliefs and spiritual worldview concerning both the relationship between humans and God and relationships among fellow human beings. Christianity, one of the world's major religions, centers on faith in Jesus Christ and functions not only as a religious belief system but also as a source of collective identity. In regional elections, shared religious identity frequently shapes political preferences by fostering moral legitimacy, social trust, and emotional attachment between candidates and voters (Nelwan, 2022).

Mr. Sahat Napitupulu, who serves as both a traditional leader and a religious leader, explained:

"As Christians, we believe that government is God's representative, as stated in the Book of Romans. In Christian teaching, whoever is elected in the regional election is God's representative. Mr. Wesly won the election, and we believe that his victory is a manifestation of God's grace for us, as reflected in 2 Corinthians 3. Therefore, as Christians, we share a spiritual bond with the candidate who was elected." (Interview, April 24, 2026)

The interview confirms that Christianity played a significant role in shaping political preferences during the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City. Christian teachings and biblical values fostered a sense of spiritual solidarity between Toba Batak voters and candidates who shared the same faith. This finding supports the perspective of identity politics based on primordialism and is also consistent with the

concept of political culture, which emphasizes the influence of shared beliefs and values on political behavior.

3. Material-Based Politics

Material-based politics in the context of regional elections refers to the utilization, distribution, or mobilization of economic resources to build and maintain political support. The findings indicate that several participants based their electoral choices on material incentives rather than cultural identity.

Mr. Jisman Tambunan stated:

"Mangatas' team had approached me beforehand, especially through our clan relationship between the Tambunan and Silalahi families. However, what we really needed was material support. At first, they promised to distribute rice and provide business capital. In short, the promises they made were exactly what we needed." (Interview, April 13, 2026)

Similarly, Mrs. Paulus Br. Sianipar explained:

"The mayoral candidate I supported was Purba. He purchased a large amount of our merchandise, especially our tempeh. We also received clothes and financial assistance from him. Therefore, we gave him our votes." (Interview, April 13, 2026)

The interview findings and field observations demonstrate that material considerations increasingly outweigh clan identity in influencing voters' electoral decisions. This pattern supports the Rational Choice perspective on voting behavior, which argues that individuals make political decisions based on perceived benefits and expected outcomes. Consequently, clan affiliation, as the principal foundation of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, is experiencing a crisis or paradigm shift as material-based political considerations become increasingly influential in shaping electoral preferences.

Factors Influencing the Dynamics of Identity Politics

The findings indicate several factors that have contributed to the changing dynamics of Toba Batak identity politics during the 2024 Regional Head Election (*Pilkada*) in Pematangsiantar City.

1. Rational-Cultural Voters

One of the most significant findings of this study is the emergence of voters who combine rational considerations with cultural identity in making electoral decisions during the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City. These individuals may be characterized as "rational voters with a clan identity." Rather than relying solely on clan affiliation, they evaluate candidates based on logical considerations, including leadership performance, vision and mission, policy programs, and tangible contributions made to the community.

Most informants interviewed in this study, including both primary and supporting participants, emphasized that candidates who demonstrate competence, integrity, and a strong commitment to regional development are more attractive than those who merely share the same clan identity. Although they continue to support fellow Toba Batak

candidates as an expression of cultural solidarity, their primary expectation is to elect a leader capable of advancing the development of Pematangsiantar City.

This tendency is reflected in the statement of Brooklyn Silalahi:

"From the beginning, I supported him because his ideas and actions aligned with my own views. Although Mr. Wesly and I belong to the same clan, I chose him mainly because of his performance, which I consider impressive. Of course, I also feel a sense of pride when someone from my own clan performs well. However, if someone from our clan brings embarrassment instead, we also experience second-hand embarrassment." (Interview, April 16, 2026)

Similarly, Mrs. Martha Hutapea stated:

"I chose Wesly because I believe he is more capable of leading than the other three candidates. I evaluated his performance and personal qualities. The fact that he is Batak certainly encouraged my support, but he still has to demonstrate genuine leadership ability." (Interview, April 11, 2026)

These statements indicate that respondents prioritize leadership competence and the personal qualities of candidates while maintaining a sense of solidarity with fellow Toba Batak. Nevertheless, several participants explicitly stated that their decisions were based primarily on candidates' vision and mission rather than clan affiliation.

Mr. Daniel Simangunsong explained:

"My decision to vote for Wesly was mainly based on his vision and mission. He has run for office several times, so we can evaluate whether he is capable of fulfilling his promises. Personally, I did not consider clan identity. As long as the candidate is supported by the Batak community, that is sufficient for me." (Interview, April 24, 2026)

Likewise, Alfanza Siallagan stated:

"I chose Wesly Silalahi because his vision, mission, and objectives were clear. Clan identity had no influence whatsoever on my decision." (Interview, April 13, 2026)

Mr. Tonikson Simatupang similarly remarked:

"One of the reasons I voted for Wesly, besides the fact that he is Batak, was his vision and mission. What matters most is whether those promises can actually be implemented." (Interview, April 13, 2026)

These statements demonstrate a significant transformation in Toba Batak identity politics toward more rational and moderate electoral behavior. The findings indicate that voting decisions and political support during the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pematangsiantar City are increasingly guided by objective considerations rather than traditional clan loyalty.

This shift is further supported by other informants. Rizky Sianturi, who served as the chairperson of a polling station committee (KPPS) during the election, explained:

"The primary consideration in choosing a candidate should not simply be whether the person belongs to the same clan. Voters should evaluate the candidate's integrity, educational background, professional experience, and, above all, their tangible contributions to society. Once elected, what people should truly experience is real development, such as better roads and improvements throughout Pematangsiantar." (Interview, April 13, 2026)

Similarly, the academician Novdin Sianturi stated:

"We want a qualified Batak leader-someone with strong development programs and the ability to improve the city. The mayor of Pematangsiantar must be capable of making professional decisions and must be bold, in the sense of being competent and serious. Otherwise, the city will continue to stagnate." (Interview, April 28, 2026)

A similar perspective was expressed by A. Sitio:

"What matters now is choosing the best candidate—someone who prioritizes the welfare and comfort of the people. If a candidate is Batak but offers nothing beyond symbolic identity, there is no reason to support them." (Interview, April 28, 2026)

The interview findings suggest that voters increasingly expect candidates to demonstrate integrity, commitment to urban development, concern for public welfare, and professionalism in governance.

Additional evidence comes from participants representing community organizations. Mr. P. Sianturi, a *punguan* (clan association) administrator, stated:

"A punguan is simply an association of people from the same clan. Batak people in Pematangsiantar have become increasingly wise in making political choices. Our role is mainly related to customary affairs, such as marriage ceremonies, funerals, and other traditional events." (Interview, April 15, 2026)

Likewise, Mr. A. Simamora, a political party official, explained:

"As party members, we naturally support the candidates officially nominated by our party. In my opinion, Toba Batak people have always been actively involved in local elections in Pematangsiantar. Moreover, many members of our party are Toba Batak. Whoever is nominated by the party deserves our full support." (Interview, April 18, 2026)

These statements indicate that both *punguan* organizations and political parties increasingly perform their respective institutional roles in a rational manner rather than relying solely on clan affiliation. Collectively, the interview findings suggest that electoral decision-making has shifted toward rationality and moderate political thinking, reflecting voters' aspirations for tangible improvements in Pematangsiantar City.

From the perspective of political behavior, this tendency is consistent with the Rational Choice approach, which argues that electoral decisions are primarily based on the rational calculations of competent citizens rather than on strong social-structural or partisan attachments (Ramadhan, 2020).

This finding differs substantially from previous studies. Lumbantoruan (2025) and Saputra (2025) found that voting behavior remained strongly influenced by the traditional authority of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, particularly through clan identity. In contrast, the present study demonstrates a significant transformation toward more rational electoral behavior. Clan affiliation no longer serves as the principal basis for political choice but instead functions primarily as a cultural institution that preserves customary traditions and social kinship. This transformation reflects the changing needs of an increasingly urban society, where voters in Pematangsiantar City place greater emphasis on candidates' competence and rational qualifications than on shared clan identity.

2. The Influence of Christianity

The findings indicate that voting behavior in the 2024 Pematangsiantar mayoral election was shaped not only by rational considerations but also by the strong influence of Christian identity. For the Batak Toba community, Christianity constitutes an inseparable component of ethnic identity, creating a close relationship between religious affiliation and political preference. This relationship is reflected in the consistency of Christian voters and the spiritual solidarity established between voters and political candidates. Candidates who actively participated in religious activities, including church services, religious celebrations, social ministries, and youth fellowship programs, were perceived more positively by voters because such involvement demonstrated shared religious values and communal commitment. Consequently, Christian identity functioned as an important symbolic resource in strengthening political legitimacy among Batak Toba voters. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that religious identity in Indonesian elections often serves as a political resource for strengthening collective solidarity and influencing electoral preferences (Panjaitan & Mahrawa, 2026; Yunus et al., 2023).

This phenomenon represents an important empirical finding because it demonstrates that political preferences among Batak Toba voters were influenced not only by ethnic affiliation but also by shared religious identity. Several interviewees emphasized that religious proximity became a significant consideration when determining their electoral choice.

As expressed by Mrs. Dewi Sinaga:

"In the last election I voted for Mangatas. I was more interested in choosing him because of religion. I hope Christianity will continue to develop in Pematangsiantar since I am also an active member of the church." (Interview, April 11, 2026).

A similar perspective was expressed by Nico Siahaan:

"I often saw Mr. Wesly attending church services and participating in worship. He also showed concern for fellow Christians." (Interview, April 16, 2026).

These statements suggest that church membership and active participation in religious life strengthened voters' confidence in particular candidates. Religious affiliation was perceived not merely as a personal belief but also as an indicator of shared moral values and collective identity. Consequently, candidates who consistently engaged in church activities were viewed as being more closely connected to the Christian community.

This finding is further supported by Braja Pangaribuan, who stated:

"I voted for Wesly because I heard that he serves in the church and is actively involved in church activities. I also saw on social media that he frequently attended church services and had served as a Sintua (church elder)." (Interview, April 16, 2026).

From a political behavior perspective, these findings are consistent with the sociological approach, particularly the religious model of voting behavior, which argues that religious affiliation influences political preferences through shared values, social

networks, and collective identity. Religious participation therefore became an important mechanism for establishing trust between candidates and voters.

Additional evidence was provided by Alfanza Siallagan, who remarked:

"In my opinion, it is better for a Christian to lead Pematangsiantar because historically this is Batak land." (Interview, April 13, 2026).

Likewise, Mrs. Paulus br. Sianipar stated:

"Yes, I also considered religion. We should support candidates who share our faith." (Interview, April 13, 2026).

The interview findings collectively indicate that spiritual solidarity based on shared Christian identity significantly influenced the political preferences of Batak Toba voters during the 2024 Pematangsiantar mayoral election. Interestingly, for several participants, religious proximity became more influential than clan affiliation in shaping electoral decisions. This finding demonstrates an important shift in the foundations of Batak Toba political identity, where religious identity increasingly complements-and in certain cases surpasses-the traditional influence of clan-based solidarity embedded within *Dalihan Na Tolu*.

From the perspective of primordial identity politics, this finding illustrates that religion functions as a source of political legitimacy by providing moral and ethical guidance for political participation. Christianity is expected to ensure that political leadership reflects Christian ethical principles, particularly in response to contemporary political problems such as corruption, abuse of power, dishonesty, and moral decline. Accordingly, political support is justified not only through ethnic affiliation but also through shared religious values that fulfill both material and spiritual aspirations (Safitri et al., 2023). The present findings therefore extend previous studies by demonstrating that religious identity has become an increasingly influential determinant of electoral behavior among urban Batak Toba communities.

3. Public Trust

Another important finding emerging from this study concerns the development of public trust across ethnic groups within the sociopolitical context of Pematangsiantar. The candidacy of Batak Toba political figures did not generate significant ethnic polarization. Instead, respondents from non-Batak ethnic groups generally expressed confidence in Batak leadership based on perceptions of competence, tolerance, and cultural familiarity rather than ethnic exclusivity.

This tendency is illustrated by Emanuel Halawa, who stated:

"In my opinion, Pematangsiantar should indeed be led by a Batak person because Batak identity is very important and should be preserved. Besides that, Batak people understand the local culture better than outsiders and are able to adapt well." (Interview, April 21, 2026).

A similar opinion was expressed by Mr. Deden:

"I think it is perfectly appropriate for a Batak person to become the mayor of Pematangsiantar. They are tolerant, welcoming toward us, and, most importantly, they govern according to the rules." (Interview, April 20, 2026).

Likewise, Mrs. Dina Lubis commented:

"I think Batak leaders are good people, and it is perfectly acceptable for the mayor to be Batak. They are tolerant and willing to help others." (Interview, May 4, 2026).

Tiara Nurhidayati also emphasized:

"I have no problem with a Batak Toba candidate winning the election, as long as they do not harm our economy or damage the city. Sometimes they speak loudly, but they actually have good intentions and are known for being disciplined and firm." (Interview, May 17, 2026).

The interview findings demonstrate that respondents from other ethnic communities-including Nias, Sundanese, Mandailing, and Minangkabau-generally accepted Batak Toba political leadership. Their confidence was built upon perceptions of tolerance, adaptability, decisiveness, and a strong understanding of the local cultural context. Rather than generating ethnic tension, Batak leadership was viewed as capable of accommodating the interests of diverse communities while maintaining social harmony during the 2024 mayoral election.

These findings indicate that political identity in Pematangsiantar has evolved beyond exclusive ethnic attachment toward broader interethnic trust. Public confidence was constructed not merely through shared ethnic identity but also through demonstrated leadership qualities and the ability to maintain harmonious relationships among diverse communities.

This finding aligns with Charles Taylor's multiculturalism perspective, which argues that democratic stability in plural societies depends upon mutual recognition among different identity groups. In multicultural settings, political legitimacy emerges through inclusive participation rather than ethnic domination. The acceptance of Batak Toba leadership by non-Batak communities reflects the successful construction of interethnic trust, where diversity is recognized as a democratic resource rather than a source of political conflict. As argued by Syahrin et al. (2023), harmonious coexistence among different ethnic communities is founded upon mutual trust, reciprocal recognition, and the willingness to cooperate despite cultural differences. The present study confirms that these multicultural values contributed significantly to maintaining political stability and social cohesion during the 2024 Pematangsiantar mayoral election.

E. Conclusion

This study concludes that the pattern of Batak Toba identity politics in the 2024 Pematangsiantar mayoral election reflects a significant transformation in the role of *Dalihan Na Tolu*. Clan-based identity (*marga*), which has traditionally served as the primary foundation of Batak Toba political behavior, no longer exerted a dominant influence on electoral preferences. Instead, voting decisions increasingly reflected the interaction of religious identity and material political considerations. This finding indicates a transformation in the function of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, whereby clan affiliation has become less decisive in determining political choices. Christian identity emerged as a horizontal social bond that strengthened political support through shared religious

values, spiritual solidarity, and biblical understanding, while material incentives further reinforced pragmatic electoral behavior. Consequently, political preferences among Batak Toba voters were no longer determined solely by kinship ties but were increasingly shaped by religious and practical considerations.

The study also identifies three major factors underlying this transformation of Batak Toba identity politics. First, the emergence of rational-cultural voters demonstrates that Batak Toba voters continue to value their cultural identity while simultaneously prioritizing rational evaluations of candidates' competence, integrity, vision, development programs, and tangible contributions to society. In this context, *Dalihan Na Tolu* remains an important cultural reference but no longer functions as the sole determinant of electoral choice. Second, Christianity has become a more influential source of political legitimacy than clan identity. Shared faith, candidates' participation in church activities, and perceived moral commitment strengthened electoral support by positioning the church as a moral compass for political judgment. Third, public trust successfully transcended primordial boundaries by fostering multicultural political relations between Batak Toba and other ethnic communities in Pematangsiantar. Batak Toba political leaders were widely perceived as tolerant, adaptive, decisive, and culturally competent, thereby generating inclusive political legitimacy and strengthening interethnic confidence without provoking identity-based conflict.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on identity politics by demonstrating that Batak Toba political identity in contemporary urban society has shifted from an exclusively primordial orientation toward a hybrid model that integrates cultural attachment, rational political calculation, religious identity, and multicultural legitimacy. Empirically, the findings suggest that *Dalihan Na Tolu* has not disappeared; rather, its political function has been redefined from a rigid mechanism of clan-based political mobilization into a flexible cultural framework operating alongside rational and religious considerations. This transformation reflects the broader adaptation of Batak Toba political identity to the social and political realities of an increasingly pluralistic and modern urban democracy.

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