

Voter Behavior in Mitigating Money Politics during the 2022 Village Head Election in Ujung Teran Village, Karo Regency

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Abstract

Money politics remains a persistent challenge in local electoral contests and frequently undermines democratic principles. However, the 2022 Village Head Election (*Pilkades*) in Ujung Teran Village presented an unusual case in which financial incentives were not the dominant factor influencing electoral outcomes. This study aims to analyze voter behavior and explain how the Karo traditional social identity system (*Tutur Siwaluh*) contributes to mitigating money politics. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten informants, field observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that most community members exhibit traditional voting behavior characterized by strong kinship ties and deference to customary leaders (*Kalimbubu*). These local cultural values function as a form of collective moral control, generating internal sanctions through feelings of shame (*mela*) and the potential loss of social trust. The findings further suggest that strengthening social capital and revitalizing local wisdom may complement formal legal oversight in safeguarding electoral integrity at the grassroots level.

Keywords: *Voter Behavior, Money Politics, Social Identity*

A. Introduction

Indonesia, as a democratic state, constitutionally recognizes that sovereignty resides with the people, as stipulated in Article 1(2) of the 1945 Constitution (Badan Pembinaan Hukum Nasional, 2014). This principle of popular sovereignty extends beyond national elections to the local level through Village Head Elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Desa* or *Pilkades*), as regulated by Law No. 6 of 2014 and the Regulation of the Minister of Home Affairs No. 72 of 2020 (BPK RI, 2014). To preserve electoral integrity, Law No. 10 of 2016, Article 73(1), explicitly prohibits transactional electoral practices, including money politics (BPK RI, 2016).

Nevertheless, contemporary local electoral practices indicate that village-level democracy continues to face significant challenges arising from the widespread use of money politics. Drawing on Norman Barry's concept of influence, money politics functions as an instrument of political power that shapes voters' decisions through material exchanges rather than physical coercion, thereby transforming politically neutral voters into opportunistic electoral supporters (Budiardjo, 2008). Such clientelistic practices have been widely documented across Indonesia, including the findings of Astuti and Marlina (2022) in Kemiri Village, Banyumas Regency. Recent evidence further demonstrates that vote buying remains one of the most persistent challenges in village head elections, as transactional exchanges continue to shape electoral competition and undermine democratic accountability at the grassroots level (Pasaribu, 2025). These

findings reinforce the prevailing assumption in political sociology that financial resources constitute one of the primary determinants of electoral success (Zulkarnaen, 2021).

An empirical pattern that differs from this prevailing assumption emerged during the 2022 *Pilkades* in Ujung Teran Village, Merdeka District, Karo Regency. The election contested two experienced candidates, Saksi Sitepu, a former village head elected in 2011, and Solen Sinulingga, the incumbent elected in 2016. The election resulted in a substantial vote margin, with 380 votes for the winning candidate and 230 votes for the opponent out of a total of 731 registered voters. Despite the widespread influence of political pragmatism commonly associated with village elections, financial incentives were not the dominant factor shaping electoral outcomes in this case. This finding contrasts with previous studies showing that clientelism and material incentives generally remain influential determinants of electoral behavior in local elections (Sadat & Basir, 2025). This empirical finding suggests the presence of influential non-economic factors that significantly affected voters' electoral decisions.

Despite extensive scholarship on electoral behavior and money politics, limited attention has been devoted to explaining how internal community mechanisms activate indigenous cultural values as a form of collective moral control capable of mitigating the influence of financial incentives. Most studies of Indonesian elections treat local wisdom primarily as a symbolic cultural practice rather than as an institutional mechanism that shapes political behavior. Recent studies have begun to acknowledge the importance of social capital and community-based initiatives in resisting vote-buying practices. However, these studies primarily emphasize civic participation and community movements rather than examining how indigenous kinship systems function as enduring mechanisms of electoral control (Sutan et al., 2025; Yulianti et al., 2025). This gap is particularly evident in rural communities, where traditional voters often face competing pressures between short-term economic interests and long-standing cultural obligations.

Building upon these identified gaps, this study examines how the Karo *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system functions as an informal institution that reinforces collective norms, social trust, and moral obligations in local elections. By conceptualizing the sociocultural mechanism through which indigenous kinship institutions influence voter behavior, this study contributes to the literature on voter behavior and electoral integrity by providing an empirically grounded explanation of how local customary institutions may reduce the influence of transactional politics in rural communities.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of voter behavior in the 2022 Village Head Election in Ujung Teran Village? and (2) How does the Karo traditional social identity system (*Tutur Siwaluh*) contribute to mitigating money politics in the local electoral process?

B. Literature Review

This study adopts voter behavior theory as its primary theoretical framework (*grand theory*) to explain political preferences at the local level. Voter behavior refers to the patterns underlying individuals' electoral choices and is commonly classified into four typologies: rational, critical, skeptical, and traditional voters (Assodik, 2025). In rural

communities, traditional voters tend to constitute the dominant group because their political preferences are strongly influenced by sociocultural relationships, kinship networks, and customary institutions. Consequently, this group is frequently regarded as being more susceptible to transactional politics or money politics due to economic constraints and limited political literacy.

This study reexamines the prevailing assumption regarding the vulnerability of traditional voters by integrating Social Identity Theory and Social Capital Theory as complementary analytical perspectives. These theoretical approaches provide a broader understanding of how shared identity and community-based social norms influence electoral behavior. The present study is closely related to the findings reported by Firmansyah (2025) in Ketare Village, which highlighted the dominant role of identity symbols and customary values in local electoral contests. However, while the Ketare study concluded that money politics remained an unavoidable electoral strategy, the present study identifies a different pattern in which local cultural institutions contribute to mitigating transactional electoral practices.

This study also complements the findings of Faisal et al. concerning the changing orientation of local political behavior, although it approaches the issue from a different perspective. Whereas Faisal et al. found that first-time and Generation Z voters increasingly prioritized programmatic considerations over identity politics, the present study examines how the sociocultural identity of the Karo community, particularly through the *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system, continues to shape political behavior. Rather than functioning solely as an instrument of primordial political mobilization, *Tutur Siwaluh* operates as a source of collective ethical norms and communal social capital that contributes to mitigating money politics by placing greater value on customary honor than on short-term material incentives.

Overall, previous studies consistently demonstrate that local culture and social identity influence political behavior. However, most of these studies primarily describe identity as a factor of political mobilization or electoral preference, while relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how indigenous institutions function as informal mechanisms that discourage vote-buying practices. Building upon these studies, the present research examines the sociocultural processes through which the *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system reinforces collective norms and electoral integrity within the context of village elections.

C. Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design with an inductive approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the sociological meanings underlying voters' electoral decisions (Sugiyono, 2021). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the dynamics of local wisdom cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone but require an exploration of participants' lived experiences and social narratives (Yakin, 2023). Fieldwork was conducted between January and May 2026 in Ujung Teran Village, Merdeka District, Karo Regency, North Sumatra Province, a setting selected because the 2022 Village Head Election (*Pilkades*)

demonstrated that financial capital was not the dominant factor influencing electoral outcomes.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on sociopolitical representation to ensure data credibility and information richness (Rahman, 2021). The study involved ten informants, consisting of the elected village head candidate (Solen Sinulingga), the chairperson and a member of the Village Head Election Committee, a customary leader (Budi Sinulingga), a youth representative (Rudi Sitepu from the Youth Organization/*Karang Taruna*), and five village residents representing different family clans (*marga*) to capture diverse perspectives on voter motivation.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied source triangulation by comparing information obtained from village officials, customary leaders, community members, and election committee representatives. Interview findings were further compared with field observations and official village election documents. Data collection continued until the interviews generated recurring themes and no substantially new information emerged. Throughout the analysis, the researchers continuously compared interview narratives to ensure the consistency and credibility of the interpretations.

The study employed both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore participants' psychosocial motivations, while secondary data were obtained from village profile documents and official records of the 2022 Village Head Election (*Pilkades*) (Yakin, 2023). Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (Sugiyono, 2021), which consists of four interconnected stages: (1) data collection through observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis; (2) data reduction by identifying and categorizing themes related to local wisdom; (3) data display through contextual narrative presentation; and (4) conclusion drawing and verification to develop sociological interpretations of the findings.

D. Results and Discussion

Sociocultural Context of Ujung Teran Village

Ujung Teran Village is administratively located in Merdeka District, Karo Regency, North Sumatra Province. Historically, the village was formed through the amalgamation of several small settlements (*barung*), including Barung Lajangan and Karang Pulo, which were formerly known collectively as Juma Raja. The name *Juma Raja* reflects the historical role of the Karo-Karo clan (Raja) as the *Simanteki Kuta*, or the founding lineage that first established the settlement. Although the village was officially renamed Ujung Teran during the 1960s to comply with administrative regulations, the historical identity and collective memory associated with *Juma Raja* continue to be preserved across generations.

The sociocultural characteristics of Ujung Teran Village remain strongly influenced by the Karo customary system. This is reflected in the traditional settlement structure (*kesain*), which is organized into two principal clusters, namely *Rumah Jahe* and *Rumah Julu*. In addition to its productive agricultural resources and strategic position

within the economic network of Merdeka District, the village has maintained a strong sense of communal identity rooted in customary traditions and kinship relationships.

Community governance in Ujung Teran operates through the interaction of two complementary systems: the formal administrative structure and the customary social order. The formal structure, consisting of the Village Head, Village Secretary, and administrative officers (*Kaur*), performs governmental and administrative functions in accordance with national regulations, including the organization of Village Head Elections (*Pilkades*). At the same time, everyday social relations are guided by the unwritten customary principles embedded in the *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system, which comprises eight interconnected kinship roles. During local electoral contests, this customary institution functions as a form of collective moral governance that is voluntarily observed by community members and, in many situations, exerts stronger social influence than formal legal sanctions.

The significance of this sociocultural institution in preserving community integrity and discouraging political pragmatism was emphasized by Budi Sinulingga, a customary leader of Ujung Teran Village, who stated:

"We vote for people within our own village because they are part of our extended family and community. Even when a candidate is a relative, we still consider whether the person is free from money politics. That is why trust is valued more highly than financial incentives."

This statement indicates that *Tutur Siwaluh* functions not merely as a marker of cultural identity but also as a system of collective ethical norms that guides political preferences through moral integrity and mutual trust. The structure and social functions of the *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Components of the Tutur Siwaluh Kinship System

No.	Kinship Term	Description
1	<i>Puang Kalimbubu</i>	The maternal grandmother's brothers or the extended maternal elder lineage holding the highest customary respect.
2	<i>Kalimbubu</i>	Relatives from the mother's lineage, the father's affinal lineage, and senior male relatives within the same customary kinship network who occupy a respected ceremonial position.
3	<i>Sembuyak</i>	Biological siblings or relatives belonging to the same clan (<i>marga</i>).
4	<i>Senina</i>	Female siblings or female cousins belonging to the same clan (<i>marga</i>).
5	<i>Senina Sipemeran</i>	Female cousins from the mother's side, particularly the daughters of the mother's sisters.
6	<i>Senina Sipengalon/Siparibanen</i>	<i>Siparibanen</i> refers to the relationship between a father and the husband of his wife's sister, whereas <i>Sipengalon</i> refers to the relationship between a father and his wife's <i>impal</i> (cross-cousin according to Karo customary kinship).

7	<i>Anak Beru</i>	Sons of the father's sisters, who traditionally perform service and ceremonial responsibilities within the kinship system.
8	<i>Anak Beru Menter</i>	Daughters of the father's sisters, who also belong to the <i>Anak Beru</i> group and participate in customary responsibilities according to Karo tradition.

Source: Processed from primary research data (2026).

The kinship structure presented in Table 1 illustrates a clearly defined hierarchy of social roles within Karo customary society. Among these, *Kalimbubu* occupies the highest position of respect and authority and is commonly referred to as *Dibata Niidah* ("the visible God"), reflecting its moral and symbolic significance within the customary system. Consequently, the advice and moral guidance provided by *Kalimbubu* strongly influence the political decisions of *Anak Beru* and *Senina* during Village Head Elections. This kinship structure is further reinforced by the principles of *Merga Silima*, *Rakut Sitehu*, and *Perkade-kaden* 12+1, which collectively encourage electoral decisions based on familial obligations and customary values rather than short-term material incentives.

Voter Behavior in the 2022 Village Head Election

The 2022 Village Head Election (*Pilkades*) in Ujung Teran Village, involving 731 registered voters, revealed diverse patterns of voter behavior. Based on the field data, voter behavior in the village can be classified into four principal orientations: traditional, rational, critical, and skeptical voters.

1. Traditional Voters

Traditional voters constituted the dominant electoral group in Ujung Teran Village. Their voting decisions were not primarily driven by material considerations but by cultural obligations (*mehamat*) embedded in kinship relationships, particularly when a candidate occupied the position of *Kalimbubu*. This cultural commitment was reflected in the statement of Anita Br. Sembiring:

"One of the candidates is my Kalimbubu. As a Karo person, I am expected to show mehamat (respect) toward my Kalimbubu. Even if another candidate offered me money, I would still vote for my own family member." (Interview, April 27, 2026).

This finding indicates that kinship obligations functioned as a stronger determinant of electoral choice than financial incentives. Similar evidence was provided by Lestariya Br. Sinulingga (Interview, April 26, 2026), who explained that family consensus was strengthened through *runngu* (customary deliberation), allowing extended families to coordinate their political preferences. Traditional voting behavior was also characterized by long-term reciprocal obligations or sociocultural indebtedness, whereby candidates emphasized non-material commitments, such as employment opportunities and post-election social assistance, rather than direct financial inducements (Budi Sinulingga, Interview, April 26, 2026).

2. Rational Voters

Rational voting behavior was more commonly observed among younger community members, who based their electoral choices on programmatic and functional considerations. Rather than relying primarily on kinship ties, these voters evaluated candidates according to their vision, leadership capacity, and responsiveness to community aspirations.

As explained by Rudi Sitepu:

"We vote based on the candidates' performance and their vision for developing the village. Even if a candidate is a relative, there is no reason to support them if they cannot make a meaningful contribution to the community." (Interview, April 29, 2026).

Similar considerations were expressed by Maya Sari Br. Bangun (Interview, April 27, 2026), who balanced family relationships with an objective assessment of each candidate's personal integrity and previous performance.

3. Critical Voters

Critical voters demonstrated a higher degree of political autonomy by emphasizing value congruence between their personal principles and the moral character of political candidates. This group rejected short-term incentives and instead prioritized the long-term development of the village.

Paham Surbakti explained:

"I choose candidates based on their character, personality, and the programs they offer. If their vision aligns with my own values and can inspire positive change, I will support them even without receiving any financial incentives." (Interview, April 27, 2026).

This pattern illustrates that critical voters evaluated candidates through ethical and ideological considerations rather than transactional exchanges.

4. Skeptical Voters

The final category consisted of skeptical voters, whose electoral participation was largely procedural rather than substantive. Their voting decisions were influenced less by policy proposals than by personal familiarity or the fulfillment of civic obligations. Nevertheless, this group remained relatively vulnerable to economic pressures, particularly during elections conducted at higher levels of government, such as legislative or regional head elections (Riky Sandi Situmorang, Interview, April 27, 2026).

Strategies for Mitigating Money Politics

1. Election Committee Oversight

Formal efforts to mitigate money politics were initiated by the Village Head Election Committee through regulatory enforcement, voter education, and campaign monitoring. Although committee members acknowledged limitations in detecting covert transactions conducted in private settings, these institutional efforts were reinforced by informal community surveillance arising from close social relationships among villagers (Chairperson of the Village Head Election Committee, Interview, April 26, 2026).

2. Adaptive Campaign Strategies

Candidates also adopted campaign strategies that minimized transactional practices. In particular, Solen Sinulingga emphasized dialogue-based campaigning by utilizing local coffee shops as informal public discussion spaces. This approach shifted political competition away from material exchanges toward discussions of leadership experience, policy proposals, and previous achievements, thereby strengthening issue-based rather than transaction-based electoral competition (Solen Sinulingga, Interview, April 29, 2026).

Mechanisms for Mitigating Money Politics

Field data indicate that the mitigation of money politics in Ujung Teran Village operates through a sequential sociopsychological mechanism rooted in the *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system. The process begins with social categorization, whereby voters classify relatives as members of the *in-group* who deserve political support in order to preserve family honor and customary obligations, while candidates outside the kinship network are positioned as the *out-group*. This emotional attachment encourages a behavioral shift among skeptical voters. Individuals who tend to adopt pragmatic electoral choices during legislative or regional elections because of economic considerations voluntarily abandon transactional behavior in Village Head Elections, where close social relationships with the candidates substantially reduce social distance.

This mechanism is further reinforced through community interactions in local coffee shops, which function as a local public sphere where social capital is continuously reproduced. Within these informal spaces, interpersonal dialogue strengthens trust, reinforces shared norms, and expands social networks. Consequently, traditional cultural values are translated into collective moral commitments that reduce the influence of financial incentives on voting behavior.

The final stage of this mechanism is characterized by the operation of informal customary sanctions. When attempts at money politics emerge, the cultural value of *mela* (shame) functions as an internalized form of social control. Violating family agreements or customary expectations generates psychological consequences, including social disapproval, loss of reputation, and diminished trust within the community. As a result, adherence to customary norms becomes a more influential determinant of political behavior than immediate material benefits.

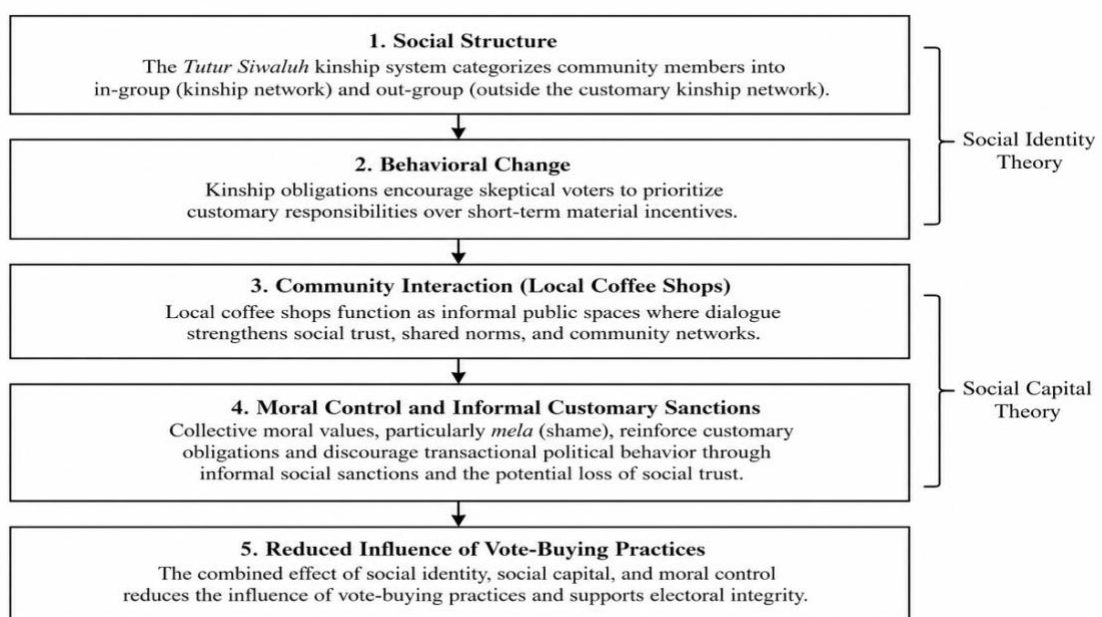
The findings demonstrate that the limited influence of money politics during the 2022 Village Head Election in Ujung Teran Village resulted from the interaction between strong sociocultural institutions and the effective operation of social capital. From the perspective of voter behavior theory, the findings indicate that skeptical voters shifted from transactional orientations toward non-transactional electoral behavior within the context of village elections. Participants who acknowledged pragmatic voting behavior during higher-level elections, such as legislative and regional elections, reported voluntarily abandoning such practices because of their close social relationships with local candidates.

These findings are consistent with Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, which explains group behavior through the interconnected processes of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison (Hapsari Utami, 2013). Within the *Tutur Siwaluh* system, kinship relationships establish clear moral boundaries that distinguish members of the *in-group* from those outside the customary network. Consequently, accepting financial incentives from an *out-group* candidate at the expense of supporting one's relatives is perceived not merely as an individual political decision but as a violation of collective honor and customary obligations.

The sociopsychological process identified in this study is further explained by the Social Capital Theory proposed by Lang and Hornburg (1998), particularly through the interconnected dimensions of trust, norms, and networks. These elements collectively function as mechanisms of moral regulation by activating the cultural value of *mela* (shame) and reinforcing informal sanctions associated with the loss of social trust within the customary community (Budi Sinulingga, Interview, 2026). In this context, social capital operates not only as a resource for strengthening interpersonal relationships but also as an effective mechanism for safeguarding electoral integrity.

These findings also extend the argument proposed by Mayong (2024), who emphasized the capacity of social relationships to outweigh financial resources in shaping political behavior. In Ujung Teran Village, the influence of money politics was substantially constrained because financial inducements were unable to compete with the moral obligations embedded within customary kinship networks. Informal public spaces, particularly local coffee shops, further reinforced this process by facilitating continuous interaction among community members, thereby strengthening collective trust and shared commitments. Consequently, integrity, kinship solidarity, and customary values became more influential than short-term material incentives in shaping electoral decisions.

Figure 1. Proposed sociocultural mechanism through which the *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system contributes to reducing the influence of money politics in the 2022 Village Head Election in Ujung Teran Village.



E. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the 2022 Village Head Election (*Pilkades*) in Ujung Teran Village provides empirical evidence that the influence of money politics can be substantially mitigated through the operation of sociocultural institutions and community-based social capital. Although voter behavior in the village reflects diverse orientations—including rational, critical, skeptical, and predominantly traditional voters—electoral decisions were shaped primarily by cultural obligations (*mehamat*) embedded within the *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system rather than by short-term material incentives. These findings indicate that informal customary norms and collective moral sanctions, particularly the cultural value of *mela* (shame), function more effectively than formal legal mechanisms in discouraging transactional electoral behavior within the local context.

The study further contributes to the literature on voter behavior by proposing a contextual mechanism through which local customary institutions reduce money politics. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that the *Tutur Siwaluh* kinship system strengthens social identity, reinforces social capital through trust, shared norms, and community networks, and ultimately promotes electoral integrity by discouraging vote-buying practices. This mechanism extends existing discussions of money politics by highlighting the capacity of indigenous social institutions to serve as effective instruments of democratic accountability at the grassroots level.

The findings should be interpreted within the sociocultural context of Ujung Teran Village, where strong customary institutions continue to shape community life. Consequently, the proposed mechanism should not be generalized automatically to other settings with different social structures. Future research may examine whether comparable indigenous institutions operate in similar ways across other rural communities and explore the conditions under which community-based social capital contributes to strengthening electoral integrity.

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