

## **Modeling the Roles of Candidates, Political Parties, and the Election Commission in Low Voter Turnout: A Qualitative Case Study of the 2024 Pekanbaru Regional Election**

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### **Abstract**

This study looks at how political communicators actually help raise voter turnout in the 2024 Pekanbaru regional election. Even tho direct elections have been running for a long time, and info access is quite ok, the turnout is still stuck low at 45.87%. Using a qualitative approach within a constructivist view, this research explores the roles of mayor candidates, political parties, the Election Commission KPU, and also voters in the whole communication process. The findings show that candidate pairs shape their messages and personal branding based on what they think the community needs, then share them through media they feel is more effective. Political parties give support by pushing the candidate's image through community programs. KPU does outreach and voter education that tries to suit voter characteristics. Voter turnout is influenced by various factors, including candidate personality, competence, vision and mission, program proposals, party support, past credibility, money politics, and the accessibility of polling stations. In general, turnout increases when political messages are delivered through appropriate media and supported by effective outreach from the Election Commission (KPU). These findings become a base for making a better political communication strategy, so public participation in regional elections can increase.

**Keywords:** *Communication, Politics, Participation, Voters, Model*

## 1. Introduction

Political communication constitutes a central mechanism in democratic systems, particularly in the context of direct Regional Head Elections (Pemilihan Kepala Daerah) (Yulian Gunhar & Zudan Arief Fakrulloh, 2025). Since the implementation of direct local elections in Indonesia in 2005, as mandated by Law No. 32 of 2004 and Government Regulation No. 6 of 2005, political communication has become a primary channel through which candidates, political parties, and election management bodies interact with citizens as voters (Hargono et al., 2024). Through political communication, electoral actors convey visions, programs, values, and political identities, while voters evaluate these messages and translate them into electoral choices (Zain et al., 2025).

In direct elections, citizens are positioned as active political subjects who possess the freedom and equality to assess competing candidates. This freedom, however, is contingent upon equitable access to political information and meaningful communication (Zilla, 2022). Without effective dissemination of campaign messages and voter education, electoral choice risks becoming merely procedural rather than substantive (Febriani et al., 2025). Consequently, political communication is not only a technical campaign activity but also a normative prerequisite for electoral legitimacy and democratic quality (Purba et al., 2025).

Despite nearly two decades of experience with direct regional elections, voter turnout in many Indonesian regions has remained relatively stagnant. In several localities, turnout has persistently fallen below 60 percent, raising concerns about political disengagement and democratic consolidation. This problem is particularly evident in Pekanbaru City during the 2024 Regional Head Election, where voter turnout reached only 45.87 percent, equivalent to 360,740 voters out of 791,034 registered voters. This figure represents the lowest turnout among all regencies and cities in Riau Province, positioning Pekanbaru as a critical case for examining the dynamics underlying low electoral participation.

This situation is paradoxical. As the provincial capital, Pekanbaru benefits from relatively advanced infrastructure, high population mobility, broad access to information technology, and comparatively higher educational attainment than many other regions in Riau Province. Geographical barriers to campaigning are minimal, and voters face few logistical obstacles to accessing polling stations. From a structural perspective, Pekanbaru appears well-positioned to support higher electoral participation. However, empirical data demonstrate the opposite outcome, indicating that favorable socioeconomic and infrastructural conditions alone are insufficient to ensure high voter turnout.

Recent political communication scholarship increasingly emphasizes that voter participation is shaped less by structural capacity and more by communicative processes and relational dynamics between political actors and citizens (McGregor et al., 2025). Studies on campaign communication suggest that the effectiveness of political messages depends on their relevance, emotional resonance, cultural embeddedness, and alignment with voter expectations (Purwandari et al., 2025). Digital campaigns and targeted political advertising may mobilize certain voter segments, yet their success is highly contingent upon message framing, audience fit, and perceived authenticity (Ladini & Yuwono, 2025). Similarly, traditional face-to-face strategies such as door-to-door canvassing and community engagement remain influential, particularly in local elections where interpersonal trust and social proximity matter.

Beyond campaign techniques, social norms and interpersonal influence also play a significant role in voter turnout. When voting is framed as a shared civic responsibility and socially valued behavior, individuals are more likely to participate (Koeppen et al., 2025). Conversely, weak social pressure and limited emotional engagement can contribute to political apathy. Research further demonstrates that voters often evaluate candidates not solely on policy platforms, but also on perceived personal qualities, emotional closeness, and symbolic identification. Candidates who are able to present themselves as relatable, empathetic, and culturally familiar tend to generate stronger engagement and trust.

From the perspective of election organizers, particularly the General Election Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU), political communication extends beyond administrative functions. Voter education, public outreach, transparency initiatives, and misinformation management are integral components of electoral communication that directly influence public trust and participation (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). Inadequate or poorly contextualized voter socialization efforts may exacerbate voter disengagement, even in environments with high information access.

While existing studies have examined individual determinants of voter participation, such as candidate credibility, party identification, social media use, or institutional trust, much of this literature remains fragmented and often relies on quantitative measurement. Moreover, few studies adopt an integrative perspective that simultaneously examines candidates, political parties, and election organizers as interconnected political communicators operating within a specific local context. This gap is particularly evident in research on regions like Pekanbaru, where low turnout persists despite structurally favorable conditions.

The case of Pekanbaru is therefore analytically significant not merely because of its low voter turnout, but because it represents a mismatch

between democratic capacity and democratic outcomes. Understanding this discrepancy requires a deeper exploration of how political communication is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated by different electoral actors and voters. Such complexity cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative indicators; instead, it necessitates a qualitative, constructivist approach that prioritizes meaning-making, lived experience, and contextual interpretation.

This study addresses that gap by examining the roles of political communicators, specifically regional head candidates, political parties, and the General Election Commission, in shaping voter turnout in the 2024 Pekanbaru Regional Head Election. The research is guided by empathy theory and homophily theory as complementary analytical lenses. Empathy theory emphasizes the communicator's capacity to understand and emotionally resonate with voter experiences and expectations, while homophily theory explains how perceived similarity between communicators and voters across dimensions such as values, background, and identity facilitates trust and persuasive communication. These theories are particularly relevant in local electoral contexts, where relational closeness and symbolic identification often outweigh abstract policy considerations.

By integrating empathy and homophily into the analysis of political communication, this study seeks to explain not only whether communication occurs, but how and why certain communicative practices succeed or fail in mobilizing voters. The central research question guiding this study is: How do political communicators shape voter turnout in the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pekanbaru City? More specifically, the study aims to develop a contextual model that explains the roles of candidates, political parties, and election organizers in influencing voter participation.

The findings of this research are expected to contribute theoretically to the field of political communication by refining the application of empathy and homophily in electoral studies, and practically by offering evidence-based insights for election participants and organizers seeking to address low voter turnout in similar urban contexts.

## **2. Method**

### ***2.1 Research Paradigm and Design***

This study adopts a constructivist qualitative research paradigm, which assumes that social reality is not fixed but socially constructed through interaction, interpretation, and lived experience (Christou, 2023). This paradigm is particularly appropriate for examining voter participation because electoral behavior is shaped by subjective meanings,

communicative encounters, social norms, and relational perceptions rather than solely by objective structural factors. The research question concerning how political communicators shape voter turnout requires an interpretive approach capable of capturing actors' perspectives, motivations, and communicative strategies as they are understood within a specific sociopolitical context (Cheong et al., 2023).

A qualitative case study design was employed to enable an in-depth exploration of the 2024 Regional Head Election in Pekanbaru City as a bounded social and political phenomenon (Busetto et al., 2020). This design allows for a holistic examination of interactions among candidates, political parties, election organizers, and voters, while accounting for contextual factors that cannot be isolated through quantitative measurement. The qualitative approach is therefore aligned with the study's objective of developing a contextual model of political communicators' roles in influencing voter turnout.

## ***2.2 Research Site and Context***

The research was conducted in Pekanbaru City, Riau Province, Indonesia, focusing on the 2024 Regional Head Election. Pekanbaru was selected as a critical case due to its exceptionally low voter turnout (45.87 percent), despite relatively favorable socioeconomic, educational, and infrastructural conditions (DEWI, 2022). This contrast makes Pekanbaru analytically valuable for understanding the communicative and relational dimensions of voter disengagement.

## ***2.3 Research Subjects and Sampling Strategy***

The subjects of this study consist of political communicators and voters who were selected through purposive sampling to ensure analytical relevance and depth (Cheong et al., 2023). Purposive sampling was employed because the study aims to obtain information-rich cases that can illuminate the mechanisms, meanings, and practices of political communication influencing voter turnout, rather than to achieve statistical generalization (W. Purnamasari et al., 2025). This strategy allows the researcher to focus on actors who played key roles in the 2024 Pekanbaru Regional Head Election and who possessed direct experience with electoral communication processes (Rustamana et al., 2024).

Political communicator informants included regional head candidates, political party representatives, and election organizers. The regional head candidates selected for this study were Agung Nugroho and Markarius Anwar, the candidate pair that conducted the most intensive campaign activities and obtained the highest vote share in the 2024 Pekanbaru election. These candidates were chosen due to their high level of public visibility and communicative dominance throughout the electoral process, which provided substantial empirical material for examining campaign

strategies and voter engagement practices. Although the election involved five candidate pairs, preliminary mapping indicated that the remaining candidates demonstrated relatively limited campaign intensity and public outreach, which reduced their analytical relevance to the study's focus on communication effectiveness rather than electoral competition.

Political party informants were drawn from the leadership of the Democratic Party Branch Leadership Council (DPC) of Pekanbaru City, which formally supported the selected candidate pair. Selection criteria emphasized direct involvement in campaign planning, voter outreach activities, and the formulation and dissemination of political messages during the election period. This ensured that party informants were able to provide detailed insights into organizational communication strategies and coordination with candidates.

Election organizer informants consisted of commissioners of the Pekanbaru City General Election Commission who were responsible for voter education, public socialization, and community participation programs. These individuals were selected because of their institutional authority and operational responsibility in designing and implementing communication initiatives aimed at increasing voter awareness, trust, and participation.

In addition to political communicators, the study included voters who both participated in and abstained from voting in the 2024 election. Non-voters were identified through community networks, neighborhood leaders, and snowball sampling, allowing access to individuals who are often underrepresented in electoral research. Inclusion criteria for voter informants included diversity in age, gender, and educational background to capture a wide range of experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of political communication. The perspectives of non-voters were particularly important for identifying perceived communication gaps, trust deficits, and motivational barriers that contributed to electoral abstention. Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, as indicated by the repetition of key patterns across interviews and the absence of substantively new insights. This approach ensured that the data collected were sufficient to support robust thematic analysis and theoretical interpretation.

#### ***2.4 Data Collection Techniques***

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis (Cole, 2024).

##### **1. Interviews:**

Semi-structured interview guides were developed separately for each category of informant (candidates, party representatives, KPU officials, and voters). The guides covered themes such as communication strategies, message framing, emotional engagement,

voter outreach methods, perceptions of voter apathy, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and, when necessary, online, with durations ranging from 45 to 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim.

## 2. Documentation:

Documentary data included official KPU reports, campaign materials, party publications, social media content, voter education materials, and relevant regulations. These documents were used to contextualize interview findings and support data triangulation.

### ***2.5 Data Analysis Procedure***

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and document analysis (Khan, 2022). Semi-structured interview guides were developed specifically for each category of informant, including regional head candidates, political party representatives, General Election Commission officials, and voters. The interview guides were designed to explore key themes such as political communication strategies, message framing, emotional engagement, voter outreach practices, perceptions of voter apathy, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion in the electoral process. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or, when necessary, through online platforms, depending on accessibility and participant availability. Each interview lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and analytical rigor (Slemon, 2025).

In addition to interviews, documentary data were collected to complement and contextualize the interview findings. These documents included official reports issued by the General Election Commission, campaign materials produced by candidates and political parties, party publications, social media content related to the election, voter education materials, and relevant electoral regulations. Documentary analysis enabled the researcher to examine formal communication strategies, public messaging, and institutional narratives surrounding the election. The integration of documentary data with interview findings supported data triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the analysis by allowing cross-validation of information obtained from different sources.

### ***2.6 Trustworthiness and Rigor***

To ensure research rigor and trustworthiness, this study employed established qualitative validation strategies. Credibility was enhanced through data triangulation by comparing information obtained from multiple informant groups, including political communicators and voters, as well as from diverse documentary sources. This approach allowed for

cross-verification of findings and reduced the risk of relying on a single perspective. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear and systematic audit trail that documented research decisions, data collection procedures, coding processes, and analytical steps, enabling transparency and methodological consistency throughout the study. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memo writing and peer debriefing, which helped the researcher critically examine interpretations and minimize personal bias in the analysis. Transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of the research context, actors, and communicative processes, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other local electoral settings with similar characteristics.

### 2.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research. Informants were provided with clear explanations of the research purpose, procedures, and their rights. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used where necessary, and all data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

### 2.8 Methodological Alignment

The constructivist paradigm is operationalized in this study through its emphasis on participant meanings, interpretive analysis, and contextual understanding. The use of empathy and homophily theories as analytical lenses is consistent with this paradigm, as both theories focus on subjective perception, relational interaction, and socially constructed understanding within political communication.

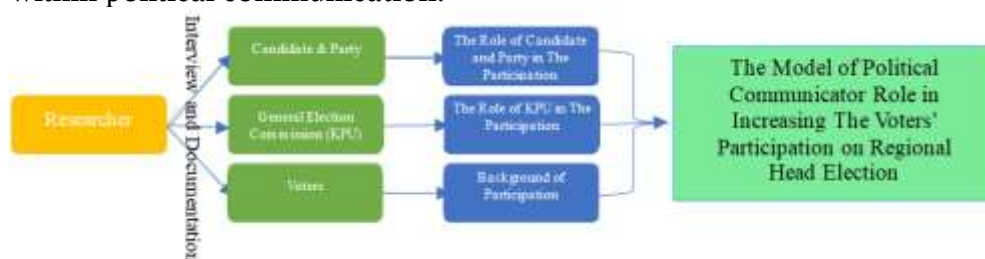


Figure 1. Research Methodology Flowchart

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Fragmented Political Communication and Organizational Dominance in the 2024 Pekanbaru Regional Election

Political communication in the 2024 regional head election in Pekanbaru was shaped by structurally interdependent yet asymmetrically resourced actors: candidate pairs, political parties, and the General Election Commission (KPU). Although the KPU provided a standardized

institutional framework through formal decrees, administrative coordination, and voter management (791,034 registered voters across 15 sub-districts), communicative capacity varied significantly among candidate pairs due to differences in party infrastructure and organizational embeddedness.

Five candidate pairs competed in the election under KPU Decree No. 518/2024. However, documentary evidence and campaign activity records indicate that the pair Agung Nugroho Markarius Anwar demonstrated the highest campaign intensity and ultimately secured 45.47% of the vote (164,041 votes), as formalized in KPU Decree No. 4 of 2025. Their electoral advantage was closely associated with strong institutional backing from the Democratic Party and PKS, where both candidates occupied strategic leadership positions at the provincial level. This structural embeddedness enabled access to mobilization networks, logistical coordination, and sustained grassroots engagement, particularly in high-density districts such as Tuah Madani (110,969 voters), Marpoyan Damai (104,731 voters), and Tenayan Raya (81,813 voters).

In contrast, other candidate pairs largely composed of professional figures or non-central party cadres operated with comparatively weaker organizational infrastructures. Their campaign activities were more sporadic and less evenly distributed across sub-districts, limiting cumulative voter exposure. The resulting communication environment was fragmented: while formal democratic procedures ensured equal candidacy status, actual voter contact and message reinforcement were unevenly distributed due to disparities in party-based coordination capacity. The following tables clarify both the electoral competition structure and the demographic distribution that shaped communicative outreach:

**Table 1.** Candidate Pairs, Party Support, and Electoral Outcome

No	Candidate Pair	Supporting Parties	Organizational Position	Vote Share	Votes Obtained
1	Muflihun – Ade Hartati	Gerindra, PAN, PSI, Perindo, Gelora, Prima	Party cadres/professionals	—	—
2	Instiawati Ayus – Taufik Arrakhman	Hanura, PKB	Party cadres/professionals	—	—
3	Ida Yulita Susanti – Kharisman	Golkar, PDIP	Party cadres/professionals	—	—

No	Candidate Pair	Supporting Parties	Organizational Position	Vote Share	Votes Obtained
	Risanda				
4	Edy Natar Nasution – Destrayani Bibra	Nasdem, PPP	Party cadres/professionals	—	—
5	<b>Agung Nugroho – Markarius Anwar</b>	Democratic Party, PKS	Provincial party leaders	<b>45.47%</b>	<b>164,041</b>

**Table 2.** Permanent Voter Distribution by Sub-District

Sub-District	Total Voters
Tuah Madani	110,969
Marpoyan Damai	104,731
Tenayan Raya	81,813
Bukit Raya	76,193
Rumbai	71,693
Payung Sekaki	71,628
Binawidya	55,439
Kulim	40,234
Sukajadi	34,300
Lima Puluh	32,862
Senapelan	28,084
East Rumbai	25,300
West Rumbai	20,830
Pekanbaru City	19,157
Sail	17,801
<b>Total</b>	<b>791,034</b>

The data suggest that communicative dominance in this election was not solely a function of financial resources or media exposure but rather the result of deep organizational integration within party networks. Strong party leadership positions enabled sustained grassroots mobilization and repeated interpersonal communication, particularly in densely populated

districts where systematic coordination was essential. Conversely, weaker institutional embedding constrained the communicative reach of competing candidates, reinforcing asymmetrical patterns of voter exposure. Overall, the 2024 Pekanbaru election illustrates how disparities in organizational capacity generate fragmented political communication environments, shaping both electoral outcomes and the inclusiveness of local democratic participation.

### ***3.2 Integrated Communicative Strategy: Mapping, Branding, Messaging, and Media in the 2024 Pekanbaru Election***

Analysis of interview data with candidates, party elites, and voters indicates that the electoral mobilization strategy of Agung Nugroho–Markarius Anwar in the 2024 regional election in Pekanbaru operated through four interrelated communicative processes: voter mapping, personal branding, message construction, and hybrid media selection. Rather than functioning as isolated campaign techniques, these processes formed an integrated communicative system in which each component reinforced the others. This system emerged within a competitive urban electoral environment characterized by fragmented voter attention, demographic heterogeneity, and high information saturation.

Interview data from candidates, party elites, and voters in Pekanbaru indicate that voter mapping functioned as the foundational communicative mechanism in the 2024 mayoral election. Candidates described using data from the 2024 legislative election, internal party databases, and localized surveys to identify territorial strongholds, swing constituencies, and issue priorities across the city’s 15 sub-districts and 791,034 registered voters. Party elites framed this activity not merely as an electoral calculation but as “reading the pulse of neighborhoods,” emphasizing its relational dimension. Survey findings and grassroots consultations consistently highlighted practical urban concerns such as environmental cleanliness, flooding, drainage systems, road infrastructure, and informal parking fees. Voters across multiple districts reported that when candidates articulated these concrete and recurring problems, the campaign felt more relevant and grounded. A voter from Marpoyan Damai noted that the candidates “talked about the flooding we actually experience, not abstract programs,” underscoring how issue alignment strengthened perceived proximity. The findings suggest that voter mapping reduced informational uncertainty in a heterogeneous urban electorate while simultaneously functioning as a communicative bridge that embedded policy discourse within lived local realities.

Personal branding emerged as a reinforcing dimension that translated mapped issues into symbolic leadership attributes. Interviewed voters frequently characterized the candidates as “young,” “caring,” and

“decisive,” descriptors that operated as cognitive shortcuts in processing political information. Visual campaign materials, including the prominently circulated poster of Agung Nugroho and Markarius Anwar, combined professional attire with nationalist color elements and religious symbolism. This visual synthesis projected competence, patriotism, and moral integrity. Rather than generating polarization, voters interpreted the coexistence of religious and nationalist cues as balanced and inclusive, reflecting the city’s plural yet pragmatic sociocultural environment. Interview analysis indicates that symbolic meaning was filtered through local political memory. Youthfulness signified renewal and distance from prior administrative stagnation, caring implied attentiveness to everyday grievances, and decisiveness conveyed the perceived capacity to overcome bureaucratic inertia. Branding, therefore, gained credibility when anchored in accumulated dissatisfaction with previous governance performance, demonstrating that symbolic projection was effective only when aligned with contextual expectations.

Mapped issues were subsequently translated into accessible and emotionally resonant narratives through consistent message construction. Campaign messages were formulated on the basis of survey results and were strategically tailored to youth communities, women’s associations, market traders, and religious networks. The slogan *Kolaborasi Bangun Negeri* was repeatedly cited by informants as clear, memorable, and inclusive, conveying cooperation and collective responsibility—values embedded in Indonesian civic culture. The candidates’ programmatic vision emphasized strengthening Malay cultural identity, expanding digital-based public services, and improving economic welfare through job creation. Interviewed voters contrasted this clarity with other candidates’ programs, which they described as “too general” or “not clearly explained.” Narrative consistency across speeches, posters, community meetings, and digital platforms enhanced recall and reinforced trust. Rather than presenting fragmented promises, the campaign maintained coherence across communicative settings, allowing voters to associate specific policy commitments with a stable leadership image.

Media selection functioned as the integrative mechanism that synchronized visibility with relational trust-building. The campaign adopted a hybrid strategy combining outdoor advertising, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp, and direct engagement through community meetings, religious gatherings, markets, sports events, and women’s groups. Younger voters reported encountering campaign messages primarily through digital platforms, while older voters emphasized the importance of face-to-face interactions. This differentiated pattern reflects the demographic diversity of the urban electorate. However,

interview findings indicate that media exposure alone did not automatically generate engagement. Digital visibility became effective only when consistent with previously mapped issues and reinforced through interpersonal communication. Community meetings frequently referenced content circulated on social media, creating repetition and cross-platform reinforcement. This interaction between media channel, message coherence, and relational contact strengthened persuasion and illustrates how hybrid communication strategies operated as an integrated system rather than as isolated campaign tools.

**Table 3.** Integrated Communicative Processes and Their Functions

<b>Communicative Process</b>	<b>Core Function</b>	<b>Empirical Indicators</b>	<b>Observed Effect on Voters</b>
Voter Mapping	Identifying territorial strengths and salient issues	Use of legislative data, surveys, and grassroots consultations	Increased issue relevance and social proximity
Personal Branding	Translating issues into symbolic leadership traits	Youthful, caring, decisive imagery; religious-national symbols	Enhanced emotional resonance and credibility
Message Construction	Structuring coherent narratives	Slogan <i>Kolaborasi Bangun Negeri</i> ; focus on culture, digital services, welfare	Improved recall, trust, and identification
Hybrid Media Selection	Expanding reach while maintaining relational trust	A combination of billboards, social media, and face-to-face outreach	Reinforced message penetration across demographics

The findings demonstrate that electoral success was not attributable to a single campaign instrument but to the interaction of mapping, branding, messaging, and media. Voter mapping informed branding; branding shaped narrative tone; narratives guided media content; and media amplified relational contact. This interdependence created cumulative communicative reinforcement. In a fragmented urban electorate such as Pekanbaru, multilayered strategies addressing informational, emotional, and relational dimensions proved decisive. The study therefore confirms the importance of integrated political communication systems in local elections while

demonstrating how contextual urban pressures necessitate synchronized strategic execution rather than isolated campaign tactics.

### ***3.3 Party-Driven Mobilization and Grassroots Relational Networks***

Findings from interviews with candidates, party elites, and voters indicate that the Democratic Party and PKS played a decisive role in transforming candidate-centered communication into structured collective mobilization in Pekanbaru. Party documents and elite interviews consistently framed candidate nomination not merely as an administrative procedure but as a strategic communicative act. The selection of Agung Nugroho, who held a provincial leadership position within the party, was interpreted by cadres and voters as a signal of organizational seriousness and long-term commitment. Several grassroots informants described the nomination as evidence that the party was “fully investing its reputation,” which reduced uncertainty regarding candidate viability and strengthened trust prior to active campaigning.

Structured candidate recruitment further reinforced this perception. The Pekanbaru City Branch (DPC) of the Democratic Party implemented a multi-stage process combining leadership assessment, popularity evaluation, community outreach at sub-district and village levels, and hierarchical recommendation from regional (DPD) to central (DPP) leadership. Internal consolidation was conducted across cadres and neighborhood structures (RT/RW) to secure unified support. This layered process ensured that candidate legitimacy was socially validated before public announcement, thereby enhancing credibility and message receptivity among voters.

Voter mapping conducted by party structures complemented candidate-level strategies. Using results from the 2024 legislative election, party teams classified vote bases down to the RT/RW level and segmented voters by age, ethnicity, occupation, and voting history. Special attention was directed toward first-time voters and working-class communities, whose schedules and mobility patterns influenced campaign timing. Administrative readiness, particularly the possession of valid Pekanbaru identity cards, was monitored to minimize exclusion from the Final Voter List (DPT). Interview data suggest that this segmentation enabled more precise scheduling of outreach activities and more targeted issue framing.

Mobilization extended beyond conventional campaign messaging. Party-led social programs such as disaster relief, MSME empowerment initiatives, and sports activities functioned as relational communication embedded within everyday social interactions. Rather than presenting overt electoral appeals, these programs cultivated familiarity and trust. Neighborhood-level cadres (RT/RW) acted as interpersonal communicators who validated voter data, encouraged turnout, prepared election witnesses, and maintained continuous contact with residents. In

areas where these micro-level networks were active, respondents reported higher motivation to participate. The data therefore indicate that sustained relational trust, cultivated through party infrastructure, was a stronger determinant of turnout than short-term persuasive messaging alone.

### ***3.4 Institutional Electoral Communication and the Dynamics of Low Turnout***

In contrast to party-driven mobilization, the General Election Commission (KPU) in Pekanbaru occupied a central but structurally constrained communicative position. Institutionally, the KPU framed voter participation as a civic obligation and established a turnout target of 77.5 percent based on provincial benchmarks and assumptions regarding local educational attainment. However, interviews with commissioners indicate that this target functioned primarily as a normative aspiration rather than a strategy grounded in longitudinal behavioral data. Changes in commissioner composition and limited access to systematic evaluation data from the 2017 election weakened strategic continuity in electoral communication planning.

KPU-led political education and socialization activities formally targeted seven voter categories, including women, persons with disabilities, first-time voters, youth, marginalized groups, religious leaders, and community leaders. Outreach was conducted in schools, universities, hotels, and peripheral neighborhoods and was supplemented by candidate debates and mass media dissemination. Nevertheless, voter interviews suggest that these efforts were perceived as informational rather than relational. Messages emphasized procedural knowledge of how to vote, where to vote, and when to vote, but lacked affective engagement. Respondents frequently stated that they “understood the procedure” yet remained unmotivated to participate, indicating a gap between cognitive awareness and emotional commitment.

Digital outreach through Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and influencer amplification expanded informational visibility. However, findings indicate that digital dissemination primarily reached citizens who were already politically attentive. In densely populated sub-districts with lower turnout rates, exposure to online content did not translate into mobilization. The data reveal a structural disconnect between technological outreach and participatory motivation, underscoring the limits of media-centered communication when not embedded in interpersonal or community-based networks.

Analysis of voter interviews further demonstrates that low turnout emerged from interacting administrative, communicative, and perceptual factors. Administrative barriers, particularly the absence of valid national identity cards (KTP) and poorly communicated voter transfer procedures, directly excluded segments of residents. Logistical issues such as relocated

polling stations and restricted voting hours disproportionately affected working-class voters, increasing participation costs. Political dissatisfaction also featured prominently. Many respondents referenced unfulfilled promises from the 2017 election, interpreting abstention as a symbolic protest rather than apathy. This erosion of credibility weakened responsiveness to new campaign messages in 2024.

Information asymmetry regarding candidate competence and programmatic clarity compounded disengagement. Despite widespread media campaigns, several voters reported limited understanding of candidate profiles and tangible achievements. Message saturation did not ensure comprehension or relevance. Where party cadres maintained close interpersonal networks, turnout tended to be higher; where such networks were weak, abstention increased. In economically vulnerable communities, perceptions of money politics further introduced instrumental considerations into participation decisions, revealing how socio-economic context mediated the effectiveness of normative democratic appeals.

Overall, the findings indicate that while party infrastructure generated relationally embedded mobilization, institutional electoral communication remained procedurally strong but motivationally limited. Low turnout in Pekanbaru thus reflects not a single causal factor but the interaction between administrative constraints, fragmented communicative strategies, and accumulated political dissatisfaction within an urban electorate.

### ***3.5 Interactional Model of Political Communicators and Voter Turnout***

Synthesizing interview data with candidates, party elites, election officials, and voters in Pekanbaru, this study proposes an interactional model that conceptualizes voter turnout as the outcome of dynamic relationships among candidate pairs, political parties, and the General Election Commission (KPU), operating within specific socio-political and administrative contexts. The model is grounded not only in documentary evidence but also in narrative accounts that reveal how voters interpret, negotiate, and respond to political communication.

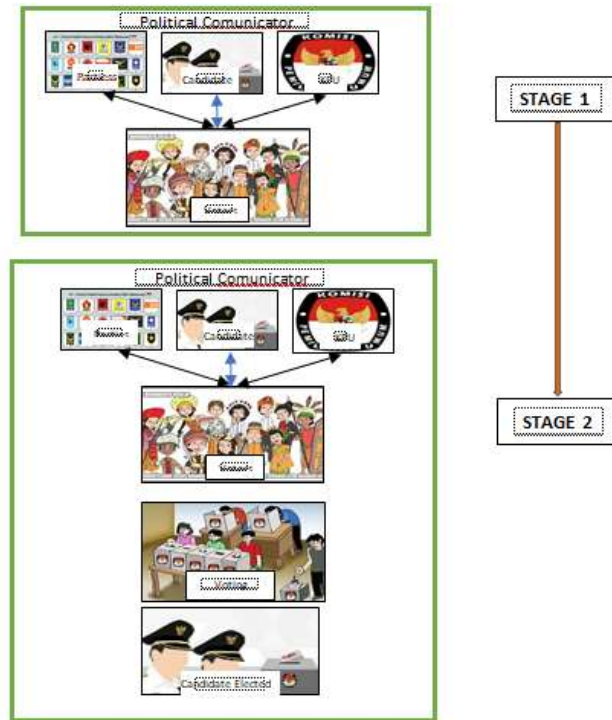
Candidates consistently described their role as “translators of public anxiety into programs.” One member of a campaign team explained that “if we cannot turn complaints into clear messages, people will not feel represented.” This statement reflects the model’s first dimension: candidate pairs function as primary agents of meaning-making. They transform community problems such as flooding, drainage issues, and economic pressures into slogans, policy commitments, and personal branding. Voters confirmed that credibility was closely tied to coherence between message and lived experience. A first-time voter noted, “I voted because their explanation matched what I see in my neighborhood.” Conversely, several

abstaining voters stated that “promises sound similar every five years,” indicating that inconsistency erodes emotional commitment.

Political parties emerged in interviews as relational anchors rather than mere endorsers. Party elites emphasized that “mobilization is not done during the campaign season, but it starts long before.” Grassroots cadres (RT/RW level) described routine social visits, data validation, and assistance with administrative matters such as identity card registration. A neighborhood cadre explained, “When we help residents with small problems, they remember us during elections.” Voters in areas with active cadres reported feeling “personally invited” rather than abstractly persuaded. These narratives substantiate the model’s second dimension: parties operate as relational intermediaries that transform campaign communication into sustained trust-building. Where party networks maintained frequent interpersonal contact, turnout motivation appeared stronger; where party presence was sporadic, voters described feeling “unapproached” or “left alone.”

Interviews with KPU officials reveal an institutional perspective focused on procedural integrity. Commissioners emphasized transparency, open vote counting, and public debates as mechanisms to ensure fairness. One official stated, “Our task is to guarantee that every citizen knows how and where to vote.” However, voter interviews suggest that informational clarity did not automatically translate into participation. Several respondents reported, “We understand the procedure, but we are not sure the candidates will change anything.” This gap between cognitive awareness and motivational drive illustrates the model’s third dimension: institutional communication strengthens procedural trust but requires segmentation and emotional engagement to influence turnout effectively.

The interactional model further integrates structural and perceptual determinants identified in interviews. Administratively, some long-term residents lacked valid identity cards, preventing participation despite expressed willingness. A working-class respondent explained, “I wanted to vote, but my ID process was not finished.” Logistical constraints, such as relocated polling stations and limited voting hours, disproportionately affected daily wage earners. Perceptually, political dissatisfaction from prior elections shaped 2024 attitudes. One abstaining voter remarked, “Last time they promised drainage repairs; nothing changed.” Such narratives indicate that turnout decisions were influenced not solely by current campaign messages but by accumulated political memory.



**Figure 5.** Role Model of Political Communicators in Voter Turnout in Regional Head Elections

Figure 5 (Role Model of Political Communicators in Voter Turnout in Regional Head Elections) visualizes these overlapping communicative channels. Candidates provide narrative framing and symbolic leadership; parties supply relational reinforcement and mobilization networks; the KPU delivers procedural information and institutional credibility. Voters interpret these signals through the lenses of trust, prior experience, economic condition, and physical accessibility. When these elements align, credible candidates, consistent messaging, active party networks, and accessible polling participation increase. When misalignment occurs credible procedures but weak relational engagement, strong branding but low trust, or accessible information but high dissatisfaction turnout declines. Overall, interview narratives demonstrate that low voter turnout in Pekanbaru cannot be reduced to apathy. Instead, it reflects communicative fragmentation: a disjunction between institutional messaging, candidate credibility, party mobilization, and voters' lived experiences. The model thus captures turnout as a relational and interpretive outcome shaped by the interaction of information, trust, and motivation within a specific urban political context.

## 4. Discussions

### *4.1 Political Communication, Empathy, and Voter Engagement: Integrated Discussion*

This study examined how political communicators shaped voter turnout in the 2024 regional head election in Pekanbaru by focusing on the interaction among candidate pairs, political parties, and the General Election Commission (KPU). The findings indicate that turnout was influenced not merely by campaign frequency or procedural administration, but by the degree of alignment between emotional resonance, organizational mobilization, and institutional communication. From a theoretical perspective, the results support social identity and homophily-based political communication theories, which argue that perceived value similarity enhances trust and engagement. The winning candidate pair's branding, emphasizing youthfulness, religiosity, and professionalism, generated symbolic proximity and emotional resonance. However, the Pekanbaru case refines candidate-centered politics literature by demonstrating that symbolic identification alone was insufficient to sustain participation. Branding became effective only when reinforced by credible issue-based messaging and strong party networks. Thus, the study advances theory by proposing that emotional resonance must be institutionally and organizationally anchored to produce durable turnout effects.

The role of political parties confirms relational mobilization theories. Grassroots cadres acted as interpersonal communicators, embedding electoral appeals within everyday social interactions. Turnout was stronger where parties maintained sustained neighborhood engagement, suggesting that voter participation is relationally cumulative rather than episodic. This finding extends prior Indonesian local election studies by conceptualizing party infrastructure as a trust-building system rather than solely a logistical machine. Institutional communication by the KPU reflected democratic best practices, transparency measures, political education, and digital outreach, but its impact was uneven. Consistent with governance and public communication theory, informational dissemination increased procedural awareness but did not automatically generate motivation. Limited voter data integration and the absence of systematic evaluation constrained targeted outreach. The findings therefore support the view that institutional credibility reduces suspicion but requires adaptive, segmented communication to influence turnout behavior effectively.

Addressing the research problem, the study concludes that low turnout in Pekanbaru reflects communicative fragmentation rather than voter apathy. Abstention was frequently associated with perceived

inconsistency in political promises, logistical barriers, and weak emotional identification. Turnout emerged when candidate credibility, party mobilization, and institutional messaging were mutually reinforcing; it declined when these elements were misaligned. The theoretical implication is the proposal of an integrated communication ecosystem framework, in which voter participation is shaped by systemic coherence rather than isolated interventions. Practically, candidates and parties should ground personal branding in substantive issue engagement and sustained grassroots interaction, while electoral institutions should strengthen data infrastructure, post-election evaluation, and context-sensitive voter education strategies.

This study is limited by its focus on a single urban context and reliance on qualitative interviews, which may constrain generalizability. Future research should conduct comparative and longitudinal studies across different regions and electoral cycles, and employ mixed-method approaches to test communicative alignment as a predictor of turnout. Overall, the Pekanbaru case demonstrates that enhancing democratic participation in urban local elections requires bridging symbolic representation, credible governance narratives, and adaptive institutional performance. Political communication becomes most effective when emotional resonance, organizational trust, and procedural legitimacy operate in alignment, fostering sustained civic engagement rather than temporary persuasion.

#### ***4.2 Structural Barriers, Institutional Trust, and the Turnout Paradox***

A central finding of this study is the persistence of relatively low voter turnout in the 2024 regional election in Pekanbaru despite comparatively strong urban infrastructure, digital connectivity, and educational attainment. This pattern challenges classical rational choice and resource-based participation models, which predict that higher socioeconomic resources correlate positively with electoral engagement. In Pekanbaru, however, structural and administrative constraints moderated or even overrode these enabling factors. Interview data revealed that identity documentation problems, distant or relocated polling stations, limited voting hours, and inconsistencies in voter registration data significantly affected participation. These barriers disproportionately impacted working-class residents, first-time voters, and mobile urban populations, indicating that access inequalities persisted within a modernized urban setting. The findings, therefore, extend participation theory by demonstrating that structural accessibility can be as decisive as individual motivation in shaping turnout.

These structural barriers were closely linked to the institutional performance of the General Election Commission (KPU), particularly in

voter registration management and polling logistics. While institutional transparency measures were widely recognized, fragmented voter databases and logistical inefficiencies limited inclusivity. This observation aligns with governance scholarship emphasizing administrative capacity as a determinant of democratic access. However, the Pekanbaru case refines prior Indonesian election studies by showing how micro-level administrative gaps, such as delayed voter transfer information or incomplete documentation, accumulate into broader patterns of systemic disengagement. The turnout paradox thus reflects not merely voter reluctance but institutional constraints that shape opportunity structures for participation.

Political dissatisfaction further compounded these structural challenges. Many respondents referenced unmet promises from previous administrations, framing abstention not as apathy but as a form of silent protest. This interpretation resonates with critical democratic theories that associate declining turnout with elite dominance, weakened accountability, and perceived policy stagnation. The findings add contextual nuance by demonstrating how local political memory influences contemporary decision-making. Voters who had experienced repeated unfulfilled commitments expressed skepticism about the efficacy of electoral participation, viewing abstention as a rational, symbolic response to perceived governance inertia. Thus, participation was mediated by trust and retrospective evaluation rather than solely by present campaign appeals.

The influence of money politics introduced an additional layer of complexity. Interview narratives indicated that material inducements reshaped electoral expectations, encouraging transactional interpretations of voting behavior. Consistent with comparative research on clientelism, the normalization of material exchange eroded normative civic motivations and long-term institutional trust. In Pekanbaru, perceptions of vote-buying practices fostered skepticism regarding fairness and integrity, reinforcing disengagement among voters who rejected transactional politics but doubted systemic reform. This dynamic supports broader theoretical arguments that clientelistic environments undermine democratic legitimacy and participatory culture.

Collectively, these findings suggest that voter turnout cannot be adequately explained through individual-level motivation or resource-based models alone. Instead, participation emerges from the interaction among structural accessibility, institutional performance, political trust, and socio-economic context. The Pekanbaru case thus contributes to integrative frameworks in political sociology that conceptualize participation as embedded within broader governance structures and

power relations. By situating turnout within this multidimensional environment, the study challenges purely behavioral explanations and highlights the systemic nature of engagement.

The practical implications are equally significant. First, enhancing turnout requires institutional reforms that reduce administrative exclusion, including integrated and updated voter databases, improved polling station accessibility, and flexible arrangements accommodating mobile urban populations. Second, rebuilding trust demands stronger accountability mechanisms and consistent fulfillment of political commitments to address accumulated skepticism. Third, curbing money politics is essential for restoring civic norms and strengthening democratic legitimacy. These recommendations underscore that improving participation extends beyond voter education campaigns; it requires coordinated structural and institutional improvements.

In summary, the Pekanbaru experience demonstrates that structural inequality, institutional capacity, and political trust interact to shape electoral participation. Even within a socioeconomically modernizing urban context, turnout remains vulnerable to administrative barriers and legitimacy deficits. By connecting empirical findings with broader theoretical debates, this study deepens understanding of the turnout paradox and underscores the necessity of systemic alignment between access, governance performance, and democratic trust.

#### ***4.3 Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations***

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both theory and practice in political communication and voter engagement. Theoretically, the proposed model of political communicators advances the literature by integrating candidate-centered communication, party mobilization, and institutional facilitation into a single analytical framework. It emphasizes that voter turnout is not solely a function of individual motivation or campaign visibility but emerges from the interaction among communicative actors within specific socio-political contexts. Interview data corroborate this model, showing that voters respond not only to candidate branding but also to relational engagement by party cadres and the operational efficiency of electoral institutions. However, the model is context-sensitive: it reflects the political culture, party dynamics, and administrative capacities unique to Pekanbaru and should not be assumed universally generalizable.

Practically, the study underscores that increasing voter turnout requires moving beyond symbolic branding and procedural outreach toward strategies that build trust, improve institutional responsiveness, and sustain civic engagement. Election management bodies, particularly the General Election Commission (KPU), should invest in longitudinal

voter databases, participatory evaluation mechanisms, and localized outreach that addresses everyday barriers identified by voters, such as polling accessibility and documentation issues. Political parties and candidates, in turn, should prioritize programmatic consistency, post-election accountability, and community-based engagement to reduce voter cynicism. Interview narratives suggest that voters perceive authenticity and competence when candidates and parties demonstrate continuous engagement and follow through on promises, reinforcing the relational dimension of turnout.

The study's qualitative focus and concentration on a single urban case represent key limitations. While in-depth interviews provided rich insights into voter perceptions and behaviors, the findings may not generalize to rural areas or cities with different political structures, party landscapes, or institutional capacities. Future research should employ comparative and mixed-method designs to examine how structural barriers, elite competition, and institutional credibility interact across diverse electoral contexts. Longitudinal studies would also help assess how political communication strategies influence voter trust and participation over multiple election cycles. Addressing these limitations would allow scholars to refine the model and test its applicability more broadly.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers actionable guidance for urban electoral engagement. First, empathetic and homophilic communication should be operationalized through sustained, community-based interactions rather than short-term symbolic branding. Candidates and parties can embed campaign activities within everyday social spaces, neighborhood forums, religious gatherings, youth associations, and professional networks, allowing voters to engage candidates as social equals rather than distant elites. Interviewees repeatedly noted that personal interaction and visibility in familiar community settings increased trust and perceived responsiveness.

Second, voter education and outreach should move from procedural instruction toward problem-solving and trust-building. Using localized data to identify specific administrative and structural barriers, such as work schedules, mobility constraints, or first-time voter needs, enables tailored interventions. Continuous updates to voter databases would support targeted outreach, flexible service delivery, and better polling station placement, reducing inadvertent exclusion.

Third, addressing low turnout requires confronting voter distrust and political inefficacy directly. Political parties and elected officials can institutionalize post-election accountability mechanisms, including participatory policy consultations, public reporting on campaign

promises, and community monitoring forums. Interview evidence indicated that voters who perceived such mechanisms in action were more likely to regard elections as consequential and to engage consistently.

Finally, the study provides a practical framework for diagnosing and addressing turnout challenges by integrating candidate communication, party mobilization, and institutional facilitation. Policymakers, election administrators, and civil society organizations can use this framework to identify which aspects of the electoral process are most responsible for disengagement in a given locality. By applying a systemic approach, stakeholders can design interventions that address the structural, relational, and institutional roots of low participation, rather than focusing solely on individual voter motivation.

In summary, the findings highlight that improving voter turnout in urban local elections requires coordinated action across candidates, parties, and institutions. Empathy and relational engagement, credible issue-based communication, accessible institutional processes, and post-election accountability together form an ecosystem that fosters trust, relevance, and sustained participation. The Pekanbaru case illustrates that effective political communication must bridge symbolic representation with tangible institutional performance to create inclusive and resilient democratic engagement.

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the findings and discussion, this study concludes that voter turnout in the 2024 Pekanbaru City Regional Head Election was not merely the result of individual voter awareness or rational choice, but rather the outcome of an interactive political communication process involving candidate pairs, political parties, and the General Election Commission (KPU). Voter participation was shaped by how effectively these political communicators mapped voter segments, constructed personal branding, formulated issue-based messages, and selected media channels that resonated with citizens' social realities. In this respect, the proposed model contributes to political communication scholarship by positioning voter turnout as a relational and institutional phenomenon, embedded in communication dynamics and trust-building processes.

Empirically, the study demonstrates that Pekanbaru's relatively low voter turnout (45.87%) reflects a convergence of structural, communicative, and psychological factors. Administrative barriers, particularly incomplete identity documentation, distance to polling stations, and limited voting hours, interacted with communicative failures, such as low public familiarity with candidates' visions and

programs, weak emotional engagement, and persistent distrust resulting from unfulfilled promises in previous elections. These findings help explain why relatively favorable conditions, including urban infrastructure and higher educational levels, did not automatically translate into higher electoral participation. In this context, political communication often failed to activate empathy and homophily, which are central mechanisms in voter mobilization and political persuasion theories.

The four propositions derived from this study should be understood as analytically grounded patterns rather than universally applicable claims. Together, they form a context-specific model illustrating that voter turnout in regional elections increases when political messages are rooted in citizens' lived problems, party organizations actively mobilize social networks beyond symbolic support, and election management bodies deliver targeted, accessible political education. At the same time, the model reveals its own limitations: effective political communication alone cannot fully overcome structural constraints, elite dominance in candidate selection, or entrenched public skepticism toward political institutions.

Practically, this study suggests that election organizers need to prioritize early, data-driven voter administration, expand decentralized and mobile voter education, and evaluate participation programs using clear and measurable indicators rather than procedural outputs. Political parties should move beyond short-term mobilization and image-building toward sustained grassroots engagement that demonstrates policy credibility and responsiveness. Candidates, in turn, must ensure that personal branding is supported by visible competence, consistency, and programmatic clarity in order to rebuild public trust.

This study has several limitations. The focus on winning candidates and their supporting parties may underrepresent alternative communication strategies employed by less successful contenders. The findings are also context-specific to Pekanbaru City and do not fully account for external influences such as media bias, informal power brokers, or subtle forms of voter suppression. Future research should test the proposed model in different regional and socio-political contexts, employ comparative or longitudinal designs, and integrate mixed methods such as surveys or digital trace analysis to strengthen validation. Such efforts would enhance the explanatory power of the model and deepen understanding of voter behavior in Indonesian regional elections.

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