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## Political Party Endorsement in Supporting the Sole Candidate Muhammad Fadhil Arief and H. Bakhtiar in the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Election of Batanghari Regency

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**Abstract:** This study analyzes the political party endorsement strategies leading to the sole-candidate scenario in Batanghari Regency during the 2024 simultaneous regional elections and its implications for democratic quality. While existing literature largely focuses on multi-candidate competition, a significant research gap remains regarding the specific mechanisms of "political cartels" that eliminate local opposition. Using a qualitative case study approach with NVivo 12 Plus, the research identifies that strategic alliances (44.83%), resource considerations (31.03%), and electability (24.14%) were the primary drivers of unanimous endorsements. The findings demonstrate that this "Three-Actor Framework" transforms elections into referendum-style contests, driven by public perception (41.38%) and elite dominance (34.48%) rather than ideological alignment. This research contributes to the field by offering a novel analytical model of how institutional fragility and pragmatic coalition-building, specifically the prioritization of short-term success (41.38%) over cadre development (24.14%), effectively neutralize electoral competitiveness. The study concludes that the "cartelization" of local parties erodes democratic resilience, suggesting an urgent need for regulatory reforms to restore pluralism.

**Keywords:** Political Party Endorsment, Sole Candidate, Batanghari Regency, Election.

### INTRODUCTION

This research examines the coalition dynamics among political parties in Batanghari Regency that led to the support of a single candidate in the 2024 regional election. The 2024 simultaneous regional elections (Pilkada Serentak) represented a major milestone in Indonesia's democratic process by synchronizing multiple local elections nationwide. This policy was introduced to harmonize local electoral cycles, reduce administrative costs, and

improve governance efficiency. In Batanghari, a sole candidate pair, Muhammad Fadhil Arief and H. Bakhtiar, emerged without opposition. This uncontested scenario reflects broader trends in local politics where coalitions and party endorsements strategically shape electoral outcomes (Anzia & Bernhard, 2022; Ferree et al., 2021; Huang, 2021).

The 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections (Pilkada Serentak) in Indonesia represented a milestone aimed at synchronizing electoral cycles and improving governance efficiency. However, in Batanghari Regency, this process resulted in a sole candidate pair, Muhammad Fadhil Arief and H. Bakhtiar, emerging without opposition. This uncontested scenario was not a coincidence but the result of strategic consolidation by local elites and parties. While the landscape initially appeared competitive, four major parties PPP, NasDem, PKB, and Gerindra eventually announced their support for the incumbent pair based on their high electability and administrative competence. By late August 2024, all nine parties in the Batanghari Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) had joined this coalition, effectively eliminating any opposition and transforming the election into a "yes or no" referendum for voters (Ronderos et al., 2022; Spoon & Pulido-Gómez, 2020). Fadhil Arief demonstrated administrative competence, while Bakhtiar brought complementary experience and strong local influence, making the pair a pragmatic choice for maintaining political relevance and effective governance. Potential challengers, such as Hasbi Anshory, withdrew due to internal party considerations, further solidifying the field. The consolidated support led to a situation where parties viewed their options as a strategic "yes" or "no" choice: retain the incumbent or risk a rerun, turning the election into a referendum rather than a true contest (Compton, 2025; Ernazarov, 2025; Fikri et al., 2025).

This phenomenon highlights a significant theoretical shift where political parties prioritize short-term electoral success over long-term institutional goals such as cadre development. The shift suggests that party functions have moved from being platforms for political education to becoming mere electoral vehicles driven by pragmatism rather than ideology. For parties with limited resources, joining a popular incumbent minimizes risk and maximizes potential influence, yet it undermines the competitive spirit essential to democracy. This case illustrates the "cartelization" of local politics, where elite-driven coalitions reshape the political ecosystem, potentially eroding public trust and leading to voter apathy. By focusing on this specific case, the research addresses a critical literature gap regarding how elite pragmatism and institutional fragility in candidate recruitment eliminate competition in Indonesia's local democracy. (Donovan et al., 2025; Fukumoto, 2025; Ramadani, 2025; Pettigrew & Radley, 2025; Stępień & Pierzgański, 2025).

This situation raises critical questions and discussions that tend to affect the political parties' nature, their slowing down, and their political pragmatism, thereby weakening the internal party mechanism for candidate recruitment. Political pragmatism in this context refers to prioritizing short-term electoral success over long-term institutional goals, such as cadre development, through the ideological approach the party used. With support, the sole candidate has abdicated their responsibility to nurture alternative leadership that may emerge in their ranks or within the institution (McCune & Graham-Squire, 2024; Rossini et al., 2024). This phenomenon reflects the broader pattern in Indonesian local politics: the functions of political parties have shifted from a political education platform to becoming more electoral vehicles. The absence of competing candidates in the Batanghari case underscores the institutional fragility: the parties preferred the popular incumbent, who could guarantee victory, with the side effect of a patronage network rather than investing in grassroots cadre development (Barker et al., 2024; Riboldi et al., 2024).

The multiple impacts of the strategy; on the other hand, the unified support of Fadhil and Bakhtiar is interpreted as a rational response in electoral case realities. The incumbents get a lot more advantages, including recognition, administrative resources, and established

voter trust. Incumbents often enjoy significant advantages, including name recognition, administrative resources, and established voter trust. For parties operating with limited resources, joining the incumbent can minimize risk and maximize the opportunity to win the game in the context of political support and influence. On the other hand, this approach has undermined democracy's competitive spirit. Elections are designed to offer voters meaningful choices; the absence of alternative candidates reduces those choices to mere formality. With the legal framework that can accommodate single-candidate elections through the "yes/no" mechanism, we can debate and question the democratic quality (Gao & Templeman, 2023; Wolk et al., 2023). The voter engagement debate, indeed, and the legitimacy of the mandate could be contested, especially if approval rates fall short of expectations. The case of Batanghari illustrates how the elite-driven coalitions can reshape the local political ecosystem. The rapid and massive coalition of nine parties around one candidate suggests that ideological borders among those parties have already blurred at the local level, with ideology not the main commodity but pragmatism key to winning the election. Instead of strengthening the vision or competing with the policy platform, parties take the short way and pragmatic calculation centered on the electoral rate and resource distribution. This trend, if left unchecked, could erode the foundational principle of party-based democracy, reducing parties to transactional entities devoid of substantive political identity. In the case of long-run competition and vision, this practice can weaken public trust in political institutions and exacerbate voter apathy, as citizens perceive elections as predetermined exercises rather than genuine contests of Ideas and leadership (Nasution et al., 2023; Potthoff, 2023).

In short, the sole candidates in the Batanghari 2024 Regional election are emblematic of broader effects on the Indonesian local democracy climate. It references that the parties playing the pragmatic strategy, incumbents' advantages, and institutional weakness in candidate recruitment are in the same lineage. While the coalition has been successful in consolidating political needs, interests, and support, demonstrating the effectiveness of elite coordination, it also shows the weakness of this system: electoral competition can be neutralized through strategic endorsements. This case invites reflection with deeper views about how political parties can balance pragmatic considerations with their normative role as agents of democratic representation and leadership development (Takahashi, 2022; Thompson, 2022; Trinh, 2022).

al parties motivated to endorse a single candidate were multifaceted. Performance, resource availability, and the political parties' motivation to endorse a single candidate were multifaceted. Performance, resource availability, and the desire for stability were key considerations (Arter, 2021; Ben-Haim, 2021; Holliday & Pacuit, 2021; Ziegfeld, 2021). Fadhil's administration was credited with achieving significant program implementation, which parties leveraged as their support. However, in this pragmatic approach, the structural weakness within party organizations is underscored, particularly their inability to cultivate alternative leadership. Consequently, with this support, short-term electoral success was prioritized over long-term democratic consolidation (Bodet et al., 2022; Marianno et al., 2022; Sevi et al., 2022).

Fadhil and Bakhtiar offer valuable insights into the intersection of institutional design, elite interests, and voter choice in Indonesia's evolving democratic landscape. However, the scale of these elections led to fragmentation of political competition, with many contests featuring large party coalitions, sometimes even resulting in single-candidate races. To explore the Gap and Novelty of research using the Scopus Database. Based on the previous study on Scopus database using PRISMA formulation on Advanced search TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "Single Candidate" ) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "Head Election" ) AND PUBYEAR > 2019 AND PUBYEAR < 2026 AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SUBJAREA , "SOCI" ) OR LIMIT-TO (



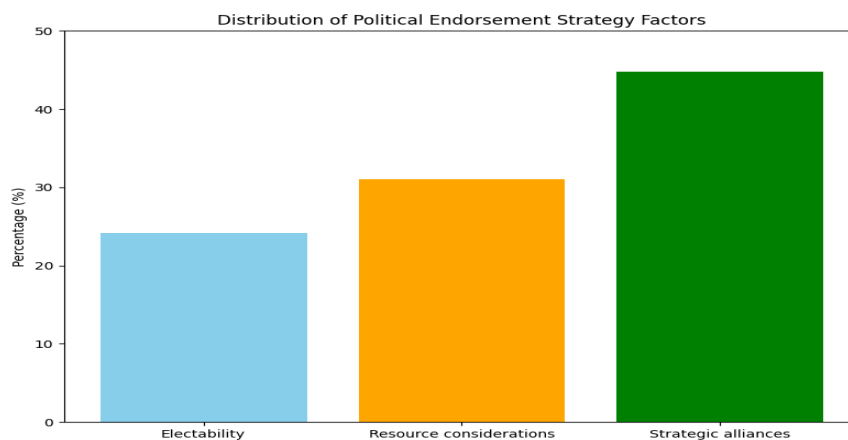
## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the strategic and institutional factors behind sole-candidate endorsements in Batanghari. The unit of analysis focuses on the political endorsement strategies of parliamentary parties and the resulting democratic implications. Utilizing NVivo 12 Plus, the research follows systematic coding stages, beginning with open coding to identify initial themes like electability and strategic alliances, followed by axial coding to relate these categories to democratic impacts, and concluding with selective coding to develop the "Three-Actor Framework".(Dalkin et al., 2021; Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). The Using Qualitative Data Analysis Software in this case using NVIVO 12Plus is to adjust and make analysis of the data efficient and organize to look up the social and political phenomenon in qualitative ways. o ensure data validity, the study employs data triangulation by cross-referencing official General Election Commission (KPU) documents with political party declarations, news articles, and academic literature. The analysis specifically utilizes crosstab queries to identify relationships between thematic categories such as the 44.83% dominance of strategic alliances and word frequency analysis to capture the most prevalent concepts in public discourse, such as the 59 occurrences of "kabupaten". These visual representations, including figures and tables, effectively communicate the complex interplay between elite coordination and the erosion of competitive integrity in the local electoral landscape. This visual representation ensures that complex qualitative findings are communicated effectively, supporting the study's objective of understanding how political parties collectively shaped an uncontested electoral landscape in Batanghari. By combining systematic coding with visual presentation, the methodology provides a robust framework for analyzing the strategic and institutional factors behind sole-candidate endorsements.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of Political Endorsement Strategy on the phenomenon of the sole candidate in the Batanghari Regency Election.

This part tries to analyze the kind of Political Endorsement Strategy that was used to create the Sole Candidate in the Batanghari Regency Election. This analysis is defined in three Indicators as explained: Electability, Resource considerations, and Strategic alliances. In this analysis, explain in Figure 2 and Table 1. The analysis was conducted using the Crosstab analysis on NVivo 12 Plus.



Source: Nvivo 12Plus.

Figure 2. Political Endorsement Strategy on the phenomenon of the sole candidate in Batanghari Regency

**Table 1. Political Endorsement Strategy on the phenomenon of the sole candidate in Batanghari Regency**

Phenomenon	Electability	Resource considerations	Strategic alliances	Total
Sole Candidate Phenomenon in Batanghari	24,14%	31,03%	44,83%	100%
<b>Total</b>	24,14%	31,03%	44,83%	100%

Source: Nvivo 12Plus.

In this case, the political support strategy in the Batanghari local election in 2024 has been using pragmatic ways with success consideration. Based on the data, strategic alliances dominate the decision-making process, accounting for 44.83% of the influencing factors. This result shows that coalition building was the most essential as parties try to consolidate power and minimize risk by uniting and supporting the incumbent candidate Muhammad Fadhil Arief and H. Bakhtiar. Alliances were not merely symbolic; they were a reflection of tactical moves to ensure resource sharing, reduce fragmentation, and unify the voters. There is an alliance that underscores the growing trend of elite-driven politics, where ideological differences are sidelined in favor of practical arrangements that can guarantee victory in this electoral battle. In this case, showing the process of transformation of the election from a competitive contest into a *yes and no mind game*, with questionable aspects of the democratic process and limiting the voter choice at the local level, or support strategy, in the element of transactional nature of local politics. financial and logistical resources when deciding whom to support.

The analysis reveals that the emergence of a sole candidate in Batanghari is driven primarily by strategic alliances (44.83%) rather than individual popularity or ideology. This finding aligns with Cartel Party Theory, which posits that political parties increasingly act as a professionalized "cartel" to protect their collective interests and minimize electoral risk. In this case, parties have moved away from their normative role as ideological gatekeepers. Instead, they operate through a lens of Resource Pragmatism (31.03%), where the high cost of campaigning and the incumbent's control over administrative networks make a "monopolist coalition" more attractive than a competitive contest. This suggests a "transactional transformation" of the local election into a "yes/no mind game," effectively disenfranchising voters by removing the possibility of a policy-based choice.

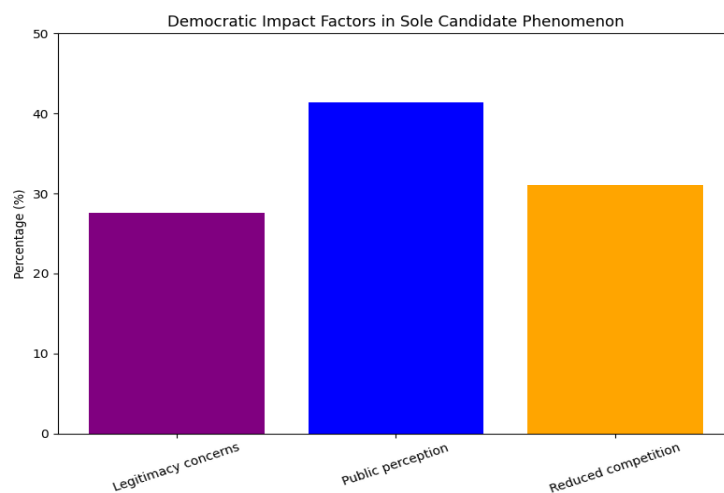
In this Batanghari case, the incumbents have the ability to mobilize the resources and maintain the administrative network, making them an attractive option for parties seeking stability and Influence. This realignment and resource-based calculation perspective reflected the structural weakness within the political party organization, specific in dependence on external funding and elite patronage, instead of developing the internal capacity and the cadre, parties tend to gravitate towards the candidate who has larger electability to win the election and guarantee the material advantage. This approach, while the pragmatic way that has been used, undermines the normative role of parties as agents of democratic representation and accountability. This case perpetuates a cycle where the political competition is shaped less by the policy-based platforms and more by resource distribution, eroding the foundations of participatory democracy. Finally, electability, contributing 24.14% to the endorsement strategy, remains a significant but comparatively less dominant factor. Parties recognise that the importance of public appeal in electoral competition and the incumbency advantages, such as name recognition, advantages, such as name recognition and governance track record, in securing electoral success. However, the lower percentage suggests that electability alone was insufficient to drive endorsement decisions without the backing of alliances and

resources. This finding illustrates the complex interplay between personal popularity and structural power in local elections (Baltz, 2025; Marques et al., 2025; Ramadani, 2025).

While voters may value performance and leadership qualities, parties prioritize strategic calculations that combine electability with coalition strength and resource access. The Batanghari case exemplifies how these factors converge to produce uncontested elections, where elite coordination effectively neutralizes competition. Such practices raise critical questions about the future of Indonesia’s local democracy: Can reforms incentivize pluralism and restore competitive integrity, or will pragmatic endorsements continue to dominate electoral landscapes? Addressing these challenges requires strengthening internal party democracy, promoting transparent candidate selection, and reducing resource dependency to ensure that elections remain genuine contests of ideas rather than predetermined outcomes (Maier, 2023; Mazák & Němcová, 2023).

### Analysis of Democratic implications on the phenomenon of a sole candidate in Batanghari Regency Election

This part analyzes the kinds of democratic implications that appear in the Sole Candidate in the Batanghari Regency Election. This analysis is defined in three Indicators as explained: Reduced competition, Legitimacy concerns, and Public perception. In this analysis, explain in Figure 3 and Table 2. The analysis using the Crosstab analysis on NVivo 12Plus.



Source: Nvivo 12Plus.

Figure 3. Democratic Implication on the phenomenon of Sole candidate in Batanghari Regency

Table 2. Democratic Implication on the phenomenon of Sole candidate in Batanghari Regency

Phenomenon	Legitimacy concerns	Public perception	Reduced competition	Total
Sole Candidate Phenomenon in Batanghari	27,59%	41,38%	31,03%	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27,59%</b>	<b>41,38%</b>	<b>31,03%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Nvivo 12Plus.

**Phenomenon of a sole candidate in Batanghari Regency** Batanghari Regency implication of the democratic implication of the Sole Candidate in Batanghari 2024 Regional Election unravels the significant challenges in the scope of integrThe democratic implication of the Sole Candidate in Batanghari 2024 Regional Election unravels the significant challenges in the scope of integrity and competitiveness in the local democracy levels; it can

happen to other regions or territories. Based on Figure 3 and Table 2, the highest result is public perception at 41.38%, indicating that public perception is the key to winning the election, specifically in local elections. It's evident that voters and stakeholders are highly sensitive to certain personal topics that can affect public perception of the politician. To prevent this, the politician should manage public opinion of their actions and moves, as perceptions affected the uncontested election. When a single candidate is presented, perceptions of fairness and choice diminish, creating backlash and skepticism about the political process and democracy in the local area. The public perception is not just about optics; it's about creating trust in the institution and influencing voter engagement. The case of Batanghari, with the massive coalition support for Muhammad Fadhil Arief and H. Bakhtiar, drove the narrative toward elite dominance and may lead citizens to view the election as a foregone conclusion rather than a genuine contest. Some perceptions can erode confidence in the electoral system, reduce participation rates, and, in extreme cases, raise political apathy, weakening the democratic landscape and system at the local level.

The legitimacy concerns are reaching 27.59% of the democratic impact, which represents the fragility of democratic norms in the case of a sole candidate or an uncontested election. In this context, legitimacy derives from the competitive process that allows voters to choose the candidate or option. If the competition is absent, the elected official is like a mandate and becomes more vulnerable to criticism, even if they have secured a majority in a yes/no voting mechanism. In Batanghari, the legal framework permits single-candidate elections, but this case doesn't fully address the legitimacy issues. Critics argue that such arrangements concentrate power within elite networks, reducing accountability and transparency. Moreover, the legitimacy concerns have extended beyond the electoral moment: in the case of Batanghari, elite post-election governance has marginalized opposition voices, and the mechanisms of checks and balances on executive authority have been weakened. This dynamic creates governance environments in which policy decisions reflect elite interests and benefits rather than public input. Addressing legitimacy concerns requires systemic reforms, such as strengthening internal party democracy, incentivizing candidate diversity, and ensuring that electoral regulations promote genuine competition rather than elite collusion.

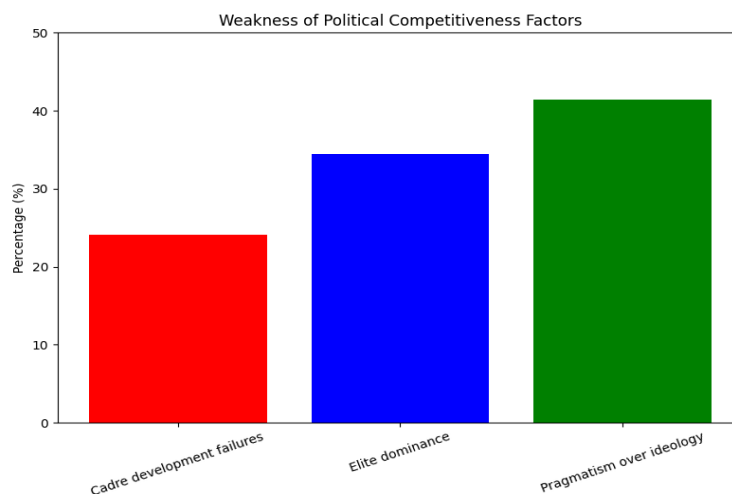
The data indicates that Public Perception (41.38%) is the primary area of impact. This highlights a critical theoretical tension in Indonesia's decentralization: the gap between Procedural Democracy (meeting legal requirements) and Substantive Democracy (providing genuine representation). While the Batanghari election followed the legal "empty box" (kotak kosong) framework, the Legitimacy Concerns (27.59%) raised by stakeholders suggest that voters view the process as a "foregone conclusion" orchestrated by elites. Theoretically, this lack of competition leads to "Political Apathy," where the electorate loses confidence in the institution, viewing the winner as a mandate-holder by default rather than by choice. This erosion of competitive integrity signals a shift toward Procedural Formalism, where the ritual of voting remains but its democratic essence competition is neutralized.

The reduced competition there accounts for 31,03% of the democratic impact, highlighting the structural and institutional weaknesses that enable sole candidate scenarios to occur. Competition is the cornerstone of democratic elections, fostering accountability, innovation, and responsiveness, and it becomes the key. In Batanghari, the absence of rival candidates results from the strategic movement and coalition-building among all parties, effectively neutralizing alternative leadership pathways. In this situation, the lack of competition not only limits voters' choices but also diminishes the deliberative quality of democracy, where diverse perspectives should inform policy debate. Besides that, reducing competition can normalize elite-driven politics, setting a precedent for future elections in which the pragmatic alliance overshadows ideological commitments (Bernardo et al., 2022;

Martínez i Coma & Lago, 2022; Radean, 2022). The implications are profound: without robust competition, a democratic system risks developing into procedural formalities devoid of substantive choice. To counter this trend, reforms must focus on empowering grassroots participation, enhancing transparency in candidate selection, and creating a regulatory mechanism that discourages monopolistic coalitions. In the broader debates on democratic resilience, this analysis underscores the urgency of reconciling strategic political behaviours with normative democratic ideals (Risxer, 2022; Yan, 2022). Ultimately, safeguarding democracy requires a commitment to pluralism, institutional integrity, and restoration of genuine competition in local processes.

**Analysis of Weakness political competitiveness in the phenomenon of Sole candidate in Batanghari Regency Election.**

Tries to analyze the kind of Democratic implications that appear in the Sole Candidate in the Batanghari Regency Election. This part tries to analyze the kind of Democratic implications that appear in the Sole Candidate in the Batanghari Regency Election. This analysis is defined in three Indicators as explained: Cadre development failures, Pragmatism over ideology, and Elite dominance. In this analysis, explain in Figure 4 and Table 3. The analysis using the Crosstab analysis on Nvivo 12Plus, in political competitiveness on the phenomenon of a sole candidate in Batanghari Regency, Batanghari Regency.



Source: Nvivo 12Plus.

**Figure 4. Weakness political competitiveness on the phenomenon of Sole candidate in Batanghari Regency**

**Table 3. Weakness political competitiveness on the phenomenon of Sole candidate in Batanghari Regency**

Phenomenon	Cadre development failures	Elite dominance	Pragmatism over ideology	Total
Sole Candidate Phenomenon in Batanghari	24,14%	34,48%	41,38%	100%
<b>Total</b>	24,14%	34,48%	41,38%	100%

Source: Nvivo 12Plus.

In the case of weakness of the political competitiveness in the Batangahri 2024 Regional election, it is deeply rooted in strategic factors that collectively undermine democratic integrity. The data shows that pragmatism over ideology emerges as the most

significant contributor, with 41,38% of identified as a weakness. In this case, it shows that political parties prioritize short-term electoral success over long-term ideological commitments and democratic principles. The Batanghari case shows that the all parliamentary parties endorsed the sole candidate pair of Muhammad Fadhil Arief and H. Bakhtiar, not just the shared policy vision, but due to the pragmatic calculation aimed at securing access to resources and maintaining political relevance. Such behaviour reflected the transactional approach that was used by the elite in politics, where the dominance of pragmatism signals a shift away from ideological competition towards a model of electoral politics driven by expediency, which ultimately erodes the foundations of pluralism and accountability.

Elite dominance, contributing 34,48% to the weakness of political competitiveness, further compounds the challenges facing local democracy. In Batanghari, the concentration of power within a small circle of Political elites facilitated the formation of a monopolist coalition that effectively neutralized alternative leadership pathways in local areas. Elite actors leveraged their influence to endorse across party lines, creating an environment where dissenting voices were marginalized, and opposition was rendered virtually nonexistent. This dynamic not only limits voter choice but also undermines the deliberative quality of democracy, where undermines the deliberative quality of democracy, diverse perspectives should inform policy debates. Elite dominance pertains to a cycle of patronage politics, the decision-making is driven by personal networks rather than institutional norms. The implications extend beyond the electoral moment, shaping the governance outcomes in ways that prioritize elite interests over public welfare. Addressing this issue requires systemic reforms aimed at decentralizing power, enhancing transparency in political negotiations, and strengthening mechanisms for accountability to ensure that democratic processes are not hijacked by elite collusion.

The most significant weakness identified is Pragmatism over Ideology (41.38%), followed by Elite Dominance (34.48%). This underscores a structural failure in the "supply side" of Indonesian democracy. According to the data, political parties have largely abandoned Cadre Development (24.14%), opting to rent out their platforms to popular incumbents rather than cultivating internal leadership. This creates a "Leadership Vacuum" that forces parties into a dependency loop on external funding and elite patronage. Instead of acting as "schools of democracy," parties serve as pragmatic vehicles for short-term electoral success. This systemic weakness suggests that without mandatory merit-based recruitment and financial reform to reduce resource dependency, local elections will continue to be "hijacked" by elite collusion, further marginalizing grassroots voices.

Development failures, accounting for 24.14% of the identified weaknesses, highlight the institutional fragility of political parties in Indonesia's local governance landscape. Parties have largely neglected their responsibility to cultivate internal leadership and promote grassroots participation, opting instead for pragmatic alliances that guarantee immediate victory. This failure to invest in cadre development creates a leadership vacuum, leaving parties dependent on incumbents or external figures with financial and political capital. In Batanghari, the absence of viable alternative candidates reflects this structural deficiency, as parties lacked the organizational capacity to field competitive contenders (Holliday & Pacuit, 2021; Potthoff & Munger, 2021; Vicentini & Pritoni, 2021). The consequences are profound: without robust cadre development, parties cannot fulfill their normative role as schools of democracy, and electoral competition becomes a procedural formality rather than a substantive contest of ideas. To reverse this trend, reforms must focus on incentivizing internal party democracy, establishing merit-based recruitment systems, and fostering political education at the grassroots level (Dehez & Ginsburgh, 2020; Dunaway & Muñoz-García, 2020; Jäger, 2020). By situating the Batanghari case within broader debates on



incumbent figure in shaping narratives. The words 'batanghari' (36 occurrences) and 'pilkada' (34) further confirm that discussions were localized and tied to the broader context of simultaneous regional elections. This lexical pattern suggests that public attention was focused on the candidates' identities and the uniqueness of the electoral arrangement, framing the election as a significant political event in the region.

The frequency of words such as 'tunggal' (29 occurrences), meaning 'single', and 'kotak' (16 occurrences), referring to the empty box option, reflects the procedural and democratic implications of an uncontested election. These terms indicate that public discourse was not limited to personalities but extended to structural aspects of the electoral process. The presence of words like 'suara' (votes), 'daerah' (region), and 'politik' (politics) shows that discussions engaged with both the mechanics of voting and the broader political environment. Interestingly, terms such as 'petahana' (incumbent) and 'partai' (party) appear with moderate frequency, suggesting that while the roles of political parties and incumbency were acknowledged, they did not dominate the conversation as much as the concept of a sole candidate and its implications. This distribution of terms highlights a public narrative that oscillates between individual leadership and systemic issues, revealing concerns about choice, fairness, and the legitimacy of the electoral process.

The word frequency analysis confirms that the public narrative oscillates between administrative formality and skepticism toward the "single candidate" (pasangan tunggal). The prominence of terms like "kabupaten" (59) and "fadhil" (41) alongside "tunggal" (29) and "kotak" (16) suggests that the public is acutely aware of the narrowing of democratic space. Thematic patterns indicate that public discourse is not merely descriptive but evaluative, actively questioning the normative foundations of the election. This alignment with "Democratic Resilience" literature suggests that while elites may coordinate to limit choice, the public continues to use the "empty box" concept as a tool for democratic protest, highlighting an urgent need for reforms that restore pluralism and competitiveness to the local landscape.

The overall pattern of the word analysis shows that the underscore highlights critical dimensions of the the the democratic sector: the tension between procedural legality and the normative expectation of competition (Kilgour et al., 2020; Wolkenstein, 2020). The frequent mention of terms related to several words like candidates, regions, and electoral mechanisms, which shows the citizen actively questioning the meaning of democracy in a context where there is only one candidate or sole candidate in electoral competition. The emphasis on 'tunggal' and 'kotak kosong' shows that the tehera are limited options available to voters, raising questions about the quality of representation and the robustness of local democratic institutions. By focusing on these keywords, the analysis reveals that public discussions were not merely descriptive but evaluative, reflecting skepticism and debate over the implications of a sole-candidate race. This lexical evidence provides valuable insights into how political phenomena are framed in everyday discourse, offering a window into public sentiment and its alignment with democratic ideals (Loepp, 2020; Tokeshi, 2020). Ultimately, the court frequency analysis shows that the Batanghari Election was legally contested and sparked a conversation that challenged the normative foundations of electoral democracy, emphasizing the need for reforms that restore competitiveness and pluralism in local politics (Nicholls & Hayton, 2020; Rush, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the uncontested election in Batanghari was a deliberate product of structural dynamics rather than a political coincidence, directly addressing the

problem of eroding democratic competition in Indonesia. By identifying a "Three-Actor Framework" of strategic alliances, resource pragmatism, and incumbent electability, this research contributes a specific model for how elite coordination bypasses party ideology to engineer "yes/no" referendums. These forces turn elections into elite-orchestrated outcomes that weaken democratic deliberation and reveal systemic flaws in cadre development. To mitigate this trend, Indonesia should implement legislative reforms such as increasing the thresholds for uncontested status and establishing mandatory merit-based internal party nomination processes to penalize the failure to produce internal candidates. Moving forward, future research must shift from secondary data to mixed-methods approaches, including grassroots surveys and comparative studies, to provide a more granular understanding of how digital media and regulatory pluralism can disrupt these entrenched patronage networks and restore genuine electoral contestation.

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