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The Political Business of Welfare: Social Assistance, Patronage Networks, and Poverty Management in the 2024 Legislative Election in Kupang Regency

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Abstract: This study examines the transformation of social assistance into an instrument of electoral politics during the 2024 Legislative Election in Kupang Regency, Indonesia. While previous studies have widely discussed clientelism and vote buying, limited attention has been given to the management of social assistance as a political business at the local level. This research employs a qualitative case study approach through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and field observations involving political actors, bureaucrats, village heads, campaign teams, and aid recipients. Data were analyzed using thematic-critical analysis. The findings reveal that social assistance functions not only as a welfare instrument but also as electoral capital managed through patronage networks, personal funds, legislative initiatives, and bureaucratic intermediaries. Assistance distribution was used to maintain loyalty, political memory, and reciprocal obligations among poor communities. Many recipients perceived aid as a personal favor rather than a social right guaranteed by the state. This study introduces the concept of the political business of welfare to explain how poverty is transformed into an electoral resource through the personalization of social assistance. The study contributes to the literature on welfare politics and electoral clientelism in local democratic contexts.

Keywords: Social Assistance, Welfare Politics, Patronage Networks, Electoral Clientelism, Poverty Management.

INTRODUCTION

In this article, the politics of welfare is not treated as a single process in which every form of social assistance is presumed to be electoral. Rather, social assistance may operate in two analytically distinct modes. As welfare policy, it is a rights-based instrument designed to protect poor and vulnerable citizens through publicly defined eligibility criteria, regular administrative procedures, impersonal delivery, budgetary accountability, and mechanisms for complaint and correction. As an electoral instrument, by contrast, access to assistance, the timing of distribution, the identification of recipients, and the public attribution of benefits are reorganized through political discretion, partisan mediation, personal claims, and expectations of electoral reciprocity. The distinction is therefore located not in the material form of the assistance -goods, money, or programs- but in the rules, actors, communication, and accountability mechanisms governing its distribution. In the 2024 Legislative Elections in Kupang Regency, primary data indicates that assistance could be directed toward "our people," interpreted as a favor, used to maintain loyalty, and understood by residents as a personal gift rather than a social right guaranteed by the state. These practices suggest a possible conversion of welfare resources into electoral resources, but such a conclusion must be established through evidence of discretion, personalization, brokerage, selective targeting, and reciprocal political expectations rather than inferred from the mere presence of social assistance during an election period.

Normatively, social assistance is a social protection policy for the poor and vulnerable. Empirically, in many developing democracies, it can become entangled in electoral clientelism. However, an electoral benefit received by an incumbent or candidate does not, by itself, transform a welfare program into a clientelistic instrument. Citizens may reward governments retrospectively for effective, rule-based programs, while assistance can still remain programmatic when eligibility is objective, coverage is transparent, payments are administratively insulated, and political intermediaries cannot determine access (Fried, 2012; Labonne, 2013; Frey, 2019; Haseeb & Vyborny, 2022). The critical threshold is crossed when public entitlement becomes politically contingent: criteria become opaque or manipulable, benefits are selectively allocated, brokers mediate access, politicians personalize state-funded assistance, and recipients face explicit or implicit expectations of loyalty. Garay et al. (2020) distinguish partisan organizational brokerage, which follows electoral needs, from empowering brokerage that helps citizens access benefits independently of partisan exchange. This distinction is important because not every intermediary relationship is clientelistic; its political character depends on whether mediation expands rights or conditions access on political alignment. Kyriacou (2023) further demonstrates that clientelism undermines broad, rule-based redistribution by favoring discretionary private benefits and maintaining citizens' dependence on patrons. Within this framework, Jensen and Justesen (2014) demonstrate that poor citizens are more vulnerable to vote-buying because immediate material benefits are more valuable than promises of long-term policies. Kramon (2016) emphasizes that the effectiveness of vote-buying increases when citizens' access to political information is low. Ravanilla and Hicken (2023) demonstrate that poor citizens within informal family networks are more easily targeted by clientelism, while Jöst and Lust (2022) show that clientelistic handouts can reduce poor citizens' expectations of systematic public services.

The Indonesian context reveals the same urgency. In March 2024, the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) recorded Indonesia's poverty rate at 9.03 percent, or 25.22 million people, with the national poverty line set at Rp582,932 per capita per month (Central Statistics Agency, 2024). In East Nusa Tenggara, the situation is far more severe. As of September 2024, the poverty rate in NTT remained at 19.02 percent, or approximately 1.11 million people, with rural poverty reaching 23.02 percent. The poverty line in NTT is recorded at Rp533,944 per capita per month, while the average poor household has 5.81 members, meaning the minimum household needs for poor households amount to approximately Rp3,102,215 per month (Central Statistics Agency, 2024; Central Statistics Agency of Kupang Regency, 2025).

Kupang Regency is a key location because poverty, rural areas, agriculture, livestock, and limited access to public programs create conditions in which social assistance has high material and political salience. The publication Kupang Regency in Figures 2025 indicates that social, agricultural, demographic, and economic conditions remain crucial dimensions for understanding this region. Data from the NTT Central Statistics Agency also notes that in 2025, Kupang Regency still had 87,500 poor residents, with a poverty rate of 20.32 percent. In this context, assistance in the form of food, fertilizer, seeds, livestock, tractors, housing, business capital, education, healthcare, and emergency aid carries significant political weight because it addresses the most immediate needs of the poor (Central Statistics Agency of Kupang Regency, 2025). Nevertheless, poverty and material dependence are enabling conditions, not sufficient proof that welfare policy has become an electoral instrument. The distinction must be assessed by examining whether recipients are selected through publicly verifiable welfare criteria or partisan categories, whether assistance is communicated as a state entitlement or a politician's generosity, and whether access remains independent of electoral loyalty.

Although studies on clientelism have extensively explained the relationship between poverty and vote-buying, there remains an area that has not been sufficiently explored: how a formally legitimate welfare intervention is institutionally converted into a political business at the micro-local level. Frey (2019) demonstrates that social transfers shielded from political intermediaries can weaken clientelism. Labonne (2013) shows that conditional cash transfers can provide electoral advantages to incumbents, but electoral advantage alone does not demonstrate political manipulation. Fried (2012) finds little evidence that political criteria explain the distribution of Bolsa Família, illustrating that a program may influence electoral behavior while retaining programmatic allocation. Conversely, Pinto et al. (2023) show that the allocation of social program benefits can still be influenced by political configurations. This debate underscores that social assistance is not inherently clientelistic and should not be classified as an electoral instrument solely because it is distributed near an election or benefits an incumbent. It becomes an electoral instrument when impersonal entitlement is displaced by discretionary selection, partisan brokerage, personal attribution, opaque distribution networks, campaign-linked timing, and explicit or implicit demands for political reciprocity.

Recent literature indicates that clientelism is not merely a money-for-votes transaction. Gisselquist et al. (2024) assert that clientelism affects state capacity, state-society relations, electoral processes, and post-election policies. Lindberg et al. (2022) link clientelism to corruption and the erosion of the rule of law. De La O (2024) explains how clientelism weakens state capacity through bureaucratic traps, while Mizuno and Okazawa (2025) demonstrate that investment in a strong bureaucracy can be hindered when elites benefit more from clientelistic networks. Bahamonde and Canales (2022), Duchoslav et al. (2023), Gallego et al. (2023), and Rodríguez (2024) all demonstrate that political aid and gifts are often directed not only toward the most needy but also toward regions, families, groups, and networks that are strategically important for electoral purposes.

From a voter behavior perspective, both programmatic welfare policy and electoral assistance can affect political support, but they do so through different mechanisms. Support for a rule-based welfare program may reflect retrospective evaluation of government performance, perceived policy competence, or recognition that the state has fulfilled a social obligation. Clientelistic support, by contrast, is structured by personalized gratitude, monitored reciprocity, social pressure, fear of exclusion, or the expectation that future access depends on political compliance. Social assistance therefore works not only because of its direct benefits but also because it taps into feelings of security, memory, and reciprocal morality. Kao et al. (2022) show that citizens' evaluations of candidates are determined not only by handouts but also by the context of trust and identity. Justesen et al. (2025) assert that low-income voters may be more tolerant of clientelistic practices if those practices are packaged alongside pro-poor programs. Karim (2025) demonstrates that restrictions on vote-buying can improve the selection of politicians and the quality of public goods. Thus, the poor cannot be viewed as passive actors. Citizens' political choices are shaped by calculations, needs, social pressures, memories of assistance, and assessments of who is most tangibly present in their daily lives. Analytically, however, voluntary electoral appreciation for an effective welfare policy must be distinguished from politically conditioned reciprocity produced through selective and personalized assistance.

A business management perspective enriches this analysis, but it must not collapse ordinary welfare administration into electoral business. Planning, targeting, financing, distribution, monitoring, and evaluation are also necessary components of legitimate social policy. They acquire the character of a political portfolio only when their governing objective shifts from welfare adequacy, equity, and rights fulfillment toward the segmentation of constituencies, maintenance of political relationships, measurement of loyalty, and expectation of electoral returns. Articles in the Sharia Economic and Management Business Journal provide a foundation for understanding aid as part of resource management, governance, economic empowerment, financing, and business sustainability. Sari and Yustati (2024) highlight the importance of local industries for community economic growth; Wahidah et al. (2024) discuss the profit-sharing system for cattle farming; Riznando et al. (2024) review corporate social responsibility; Mahyudin (2023) emphasizes Sharia financial governance; Irawan (2024) discusses motivation and work culture; Efendi et al. (2024) discuss financial literacy; while Asaloei et al. (2026) examine capital, education, and the motivation of female fishermen in entrepreneurial development. In the context of this article, this literature helps to interpret social assistance as a political portfolio only when administrative resources are redirected toward electoral targets: capital is politically sourced or claimed, recipients are segmented by loyalty, distribution networks overlap with campaign networks, relationships are maintained through repeated benefits, and electoral returns become an implicit or explicit performance indicator.

The novelty of this article lies in the integration of studies on social assistance, electoral clientelism, and business-political management through a sharper distinction between welfare administration and electoral conversion. The article does not assume that social assistance in Kupang Regency is clientelistic merely because it is politically salient, distributed during an election cycle, or electorally beneficial. Instead, it examines the mechanisms through which a rights-based program may be converted into a welfare political business. The conversion occurs when publicly defined beneficiaries are replaced or supplemented by politically segmented recipients; state ownership is obscured by personal claims; administrative delivery is mediated by campaign brokers; routine policy timing is adjusted to electoral calendars; oversight focuses on loyalty rather than welfare outcomes; and continuity of access becomes associated with political support. Under these conditions, poverty is mapped as an electoral market; the poor are treated as a base of loyalty; aid becomes political capital; local team networks and brokers become distribution chains; the bureaucracy becomes a formal channel; candidates' personal funds become quick financing; legislative initiatives become institutional channels; and votes become a form of political return. The theoretical contribution of this article is to introduce the concept of the welfare political business as an advanced form of electoral patronage, while its practical contribution lies in the need to establish social assistance oversight that examines budget sources, eligibility rules, personal and institutional claims, partisan symbols, intermediaries, distribution timelines, grievance mechanisms, and the dependency relationships accompanying assistance.

Based on this description, the research question of this article is: under what conditions and through what mechanisms are social assistance, patronage networks, and poverty management transformed from welfare policy into a welfare political business in the 2024 Legislative Election in Kupang Regency? The proposed qualitative working hypothesis is: social assistance is more likely to function as an electoral instrument not simply when it is distributed to poor citizens or produces electoral benefits, but when transparent eligibility, impersonal administration, and rights-based accountability are weakened by patronage networks, candidates' personal funds, legislative agendas, local bureaucratic intermediaries, personalized claims, campaign-linked timing, and expectations of reciprocal political loyalty. Under these conditions, poverty is treated not only as a social problem requiring public protection but also as an electoral resource that generates loyalty, a sense of indebtedness, and transactional democracy.

METHOD

This study employs a critical-constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm is used because the reality of social assistance is not understood as a single fact, but as a social experience interpreted differently by politicians, bureaucrats, village heads, campaign teams, and aid recipients. The critical aspect is employed because this study does not stop at describing aid distribution but examines how social assistance functions as an instrument of power, a patronage network, and a mechanism for managing poverty within the electoral arena. Such an approach is relevant for qualitative research that seeks to deeply understand meaning, context, social relations, and practices of power (Creswell, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

Consistent with this epistemological position, the researcher did not assume the role of a neutral external observer or treat interview statements as facts waiting to be discovered. The researcher entered the field as an academic investigator whose questions and interpretations were informed by a critical concern with power, patronage, poverty, and the politicization of social assistance. Accordingly, the data were generated relationally through the wording of questions, follow-up probes, the degree of trust established with informants, differences in institutional and social position, and the meanings negotiated during each research encounter. Constructivist inquiry recognizes that participants' accounts and researchers' interpretations are co-produced through interaction rather than independently given (Bobbink et al., 2024). The researcher therefore treated prior theoretical commitments both as analytical resources and as possible sources of selective attention. Reflexive field notes were maintained to record assumptions, changes in rapport, power asymmetries, emotional responses, and situations in which informants appeared to adjust their accounts to the researcher's perceived expectations. Because researcher-informant relations and shifting insider-outsider perceptions may influence access, disclosure, and interpretation, the researcher's position was reassessed throughout fieldwork and analysis (Batool and Ali, 2021). To prevent the researcher's standpoint from overriding informants' meanings, interpretations were compared across differently positioned informants, documents, field notes, and contradictory accounts. Reflexivity was thus used not to claim the elimination of subjectivity, but to make the researcher's influence visible, accountable, and open to methodological scrutiny (Poirier et al., 2023).

The research method employed is qualitative with a case study design. Kupang Regency was selected as the case because it demonstrates a strong relationship between structural poverty, the need for social assistance, local political networks, candidates' personal funds, legislative agendas, and constituent maintenance strategies in the 2024 Legislative Elections. The case study allows the research to explore a single phenomenon in depth within a real socio-political context, particularly when the boundaries between public policy, electoral practices, and business-political relations are not easily distinguishable (Yin, 2018). Primary data indicates that social assistance is not only provided through state programs but also through personal funds, campaign contributions, volunteers, village heads, technical agencies, and political networks down to the village level.

Research informants were selected purposefully because they had direct experience with the distribution of social assistance and electoral dynamics in Kupang Regency. Informants included political actors, members or campaign teams of legislative candidates, agency heads, village heads, civil society activists, and aid recipients. Informants were selected based on their position, level of involvement, and the depth of information they could provide. In qualitative research, the quality of information is more important than the number of informants because the primary focus is on depth, variety of perspectives, and the interconnections among findings (Patton, 2015).

Data-generation techniques included in-depth interviews, document review, and field notes. Interviews were understood as situated interactions through which the researcher and informants jointly produced accounts of aid sources, distribution mechanisms, mediation patterns, political claims, recipient responses, and strategies for building loyalty. The researcher used follow-up questions to clarify meanings and explore inconsistencies, while recognizing that the form and depth of each account were influenced by rapport, perceived political sensitivity, and the informant's interpretation of the researcher's position. Documents and raw data records were used to reinforce or challenge the thematic structures generated through interviews, particularly regarding the politicization of aid, the role of bureaucracy, patronage, data manipulation, citizen pragmatism, and weak oversight.

Data analysis employed a thematic-critical approach. The analytical stages included transcription, repeated reading, initial coding, grouping of codes, theme formation, interpretation of inter-thematic relationships, and derivation of propositions. The main themes analyzed include social assistance as electoral capital, patronage networks, poverty management, the personalization of assistance, and transactional loyalty. Thematic analysis was chosen because it captures patterns of meaning generated through informants' experiences and researcher engagement, while critical reading was employed to explain how these patterns operate within local power structures (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Miles et al., 2014). The themes were therefore treated as reflexive and theoretically informed interpretations rather than neutral categories that emerged independently of the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings reveal that social assistance in the 2024 Legislative Election in Kupang Regency does not merely function as an instrument for protecting the poor. Assistance also operates as political capital managed through business logic: there is initial capital, distribution networks, recipient segmentation, monitoring of goods, risk calculations, and expectations of return in the form of votes. The interview material contains accounts that assistance was directed toward supporters, framed as requiring political reciprocity, and employed to maintain loyalty. Statements such as “If they’re one of us, they’re definitely on the list. Those who aren’t, it’s hard to get,” “The regent helped us when we were in trouble, so I’m helping him now,” and “People from Kupang know their place. Once helped, they repay,” show that some informants perceive aid as moving beyond the framework of social rights and entering the moral economy of patronage. However, these statements must not automatically be treated as proof that a completed exchange of aid for a specific vote occurred. They constitute evidence of political meanings, expectations of reciprocity, and reported targeting practices that require further triangulation.

To avoid conflating perception with transaction, this study distinguishes three analytical levels. First, the perception of transactional politics refers to informants’ interpretations that assistance is politically motivated, personally owned by a political actor, or morally connected to an obligation to reciprocate. Second, practices consistent with electoral clientelism refer to observable or repeatedly reported indicators such as selective targeting based on political affiliation, mediation by campaign brokers, personalized claims over public programs, distribution close to an election, recipient mapping, monitoring of electoral outcomes, and explicit expectations of political support. Third, evidence of an electoral transaction requires a more specific linkage: a material benefit is offered, promised, or delivered conditionally in exchange for electoral support, accompanied by an attempt to communicate, monitor, or enforce that exchange. The distinction is important because clientelism includes both one-shot vote buying and longer-term relational exchanges, while not every politically beneficial welfare intervention constitutes a verified vote transaction (Lindberg et al., 2022). It is also methodologically important because perceptions of electoral unfairness differ from reported exposure to material inducements, and direct questioning may substantially underreport vote buying (Carreras and İrepoğlu, 2013; Kramon, 2016).

This pattern aligns with the literature on electoral clientelism, which posits that poverty is a condition that makes material aid more politically valuable. Jensen and Justesen (2014) demonstrate that the poor are more vulnerable to vote buying, while Kramon (2016) found that the effectiveness of vote buying is influenced by local economic and social conditions. Ravanilla and Hicken (2023) reinforce this with findings that poor voters within informal family networks are more easily targeted by clientelism. In the context of Kupang Regency, social assistance does not function as a one-time transaction. Instead, assistance operates within a broader network: families, farmer groups, village heads, government agencies, volunteers, campaign teams, and specific prominent political figures.

Interview results with one of the candidate’s teams reveal the clearest form of aid management as a political investment. The distributed aid includes tractors, water pumps, sprayers, free ambulances, volleyballs, soccer balls, social activities, fertilizer, and housing assistance. The informant noted that before the candidate became a legislative member, aid was largely funded from personal funds, whereas after being elected, aid could utilize the “aspiration channel.” In another part of the discussion, the informant estimated that approximately Rp 6 billion in personal funds was spent across the entire region, with hundreds of millions of rupiah flowing into Kupang Regency for social activities. The mechanism did not always go through formal bureaucratic channels. The team “went down to the grassroots, built networks” down to the village level, then mapped out needs, groups, and recipients.

The logic of investment becomes increasingly explicit when informants mention data regarding regions that receive aid and its effect on votes. The statements “if they win, it means it worked; if they don’t win, it means it didn’t work” and “those who sow will surely reap” indicate that political actors understand aid through an electoral investment logic. Such language is analytically significant because it provides evidence of intention, strategic calculation, and retrospective evaluation of electoral returns. It does not, by itself, prove that recipients changed or delivered their votes in accordance with the assistance received. The more defensible conclusion is that aid was incorporated into vote-portfolio management and that residents’ needs were expected to generate loyalty, memory, or support. Gallego et al. (2023) note that electoral handouts do not always automatically buy votes, but they can still shape the competitive landscape and candidates’ calculations. Leight et al. (2020) even show that political payments can reduce voters’ willingness to punish politicians who abuse power.

Other findings reveal that the welfare politics business thrives because citizens’ access to the state is unequal. An informant explained that communities often do not know about government programs they can access. Political teams then act as mediators: forming farmers’ groups, drafting proposals, submitting them to ministries, and ensuring aid reaches recipients. The statement “it still depends on who’s overseeing this, who’s delivering it” is key. The state does have programs, but access to them is determined by actors capable of connecting citizens with those programs. At this point, politicians or their teams become a sort of access manager. The poor do not encounter the state as a system, but as a network of people capable of expediting aid.

This situation highlights a paradox in social policy. Aid facilitated by political teams can resolve issues of bureaucratic delays, but simultaneously creates dependence on political brokers. Frey (2019) demonstrates that social transfers shielded from political intermediary intervention can reduce incumbents' advantages, increase competition, and weaken clientelistic parties. De La O (2024) adds that clientelism can trap the bureaucracy in a narrow capacity: effective enough to win elections, but too weak to sustain long-term development. The case of Kupang Regency illustrates a similar pattern. The fast-track aid improves short-term access but reinforces the belief that new public programs only move forward when a patron "facilitates" them.

A statement from one of the department heads in Kupang Regency further underscores these findings. On one hand, the local budget (APBD) for social assistance is described as extremely limited. Most of the department's budget is absorbed by personnel expenses, while direct public spending remains relatively small. On the other hand, assistance from the national budget (APBN) ahead of the 2024 elections is deemed "highly noticeable" because it appears suddenly through cash transfers (BLT), food aid, rice aid, and stimulus programs that leverage issues like crises, droughts, or specific needs. Regions often receive only the total number of recipients, while detailed data comes from distributors such as PT Pos or BRI. This mechanism narrows the scope for local verification. Consequently, erroneous inclusions and exclusions persist: eligible residents do not receive assistance, while ineligible residents may end up on the list.

These governance issues create opportunities for political claims. One informant noted that political elites often request to be notified when government agencies distribute aid so they can attend and "seek the spotlight." In the informant's terms, this practice is "hitching a ride." Aid labeled as coming from a ministry or the state can be repackaged as a personal contribution by political actors. In another part, an informant from the bureaucracy explained that legislative priorities should be incorporated into the planning mechanism, but in practice they often emerge during budget discussions. There, negotiations, requests for specific activities, and location decisions occur that are not always aligned with technical assessments. The statement that "politicians prioritize implementation, while bureaucrats must ensure administrative compliance" highlights the clash between electoral logic and administrative logic.

This discussion reveals that social assistance in Kupang Regency operates through two regimes of rationality. The first regime is welfare rationality, which positions assistance as an instrument to address poverty, market failures, and limited access. The second regime is business-political rationality, which positions assistance as capital, campaign costs, and an instrument for maintaining the electoral market. Gisselquist et al. (2024) assert that clientelism not only influences voter behavior but also state capacity, state-society relations, and post-election policies. Lindberg et al. (2022) demonstrate that clientelism is correlated with corruption and the erosion of the rule of law. In the case of Kupang Regency, these risks become apparent when public aid is claimed as a personal favor, while citizens lack sufficient information to distinguish between social rights and political generosity.

The business management dimension appears strong in how candidates manage relationships, capital, and trust. One informant noted that the candidate is also a businessman, so his financial resources come from both his political and business professions. Managing funds, purchasing goods as needed, ensuring delivery, conducting monitoring, and maintaining trust are cited as components of political power. Another informant noted that

SME assistance is distributed in small groups, monitored through monthly financial reports, and the products produced by aid recipients are repurchased for political activities. Here, social assistance transforms into an economic-political relationship ecosystem: capital is provided, businesses are monitored, consumption is directed, and loyalty is maintained.

Some national literature helps analyze this dimension from the perspectives of management, empowerment, and economic governance, although it does not directly address electoral clientelism. Wahidah et al.'s (2024) study on the cattle profit-sharing system is useful for understanding how livestock can serve as an instrument of relationship-based economic empowerment. The study by Sari and Yustati (2024) on local industries underscores the importance of community-based economic activities for community growth. Irawan (2024) emphasizes the relationship between motivation, work culture, and performance, while Efendi et al. (2024) highlight the importance of financial literacy. When placed within the Kupang context, this literature helps distinguish between economic empowerment that builds capacity and electoral aid that fosters dependency.

The effects of dependency are most evident in the language of residents and field teams. The phrase "as long as there are elections, we'll keep getting aid" reflects an informant's perception of the irony of local democracy. Elections are no longer merely envisioned as a space for electing representatives, but are perceived as a season when aid from various sources flows more easily. Informants also noted that personal assistance in the form of 31 tons of fertilizer was provided when farmers' purchasing power for subsidized fertilizer was low, followed by rice seeds, corn seeds, tractors, and business support. The statement "this is the reward we get from politics" shows that some actors interpret assistance as an investment yielding electoral legitimacy. These statements are evidence of political perception and reciprocal framing; they become stronger evidence of electoral transactions only when corroborated by conditional offers, targeted delivery, monitoring, or explicit requests for votes.

Such effects align with Jöst and Lust (2022), who demonstrate that recipients of clientelistic benefits may receive more, yet this actually lowers expectations regarding systematic public services. Kyriacou (2023) sharpens this argument: clientelism can weaken progressive fiscal redistribution because patrons prefer discretionary private benefits over universal policies based on open criteria. In Kupang Regency, rapid assistance from politicians feels more tangible than the state's slow procedures. Consequently, residents' awareness of social rights easily shifts into gratitude toward the provider. Rights become favors. Citizenship transforms into a debt of gratitude.

An informant who is a village head provided a sharp illustration of political work that is not always visible on the surface. Aid often flows through the government, agencies, NGOs, or foundations, so the public does not immediately grasp its political intent. As elections approach, political actors return and state that the aid was "driven" or "motivated" by certain parties. The village head stated, "I know there's that intention behind it," but "many people don't know." This statement is significant because it documents an insider's interpretation of the politicization of aid, but it is not equivalent to direct evidence that recipients entered into or complied with an electoral exchange. It shows how politicization may operate through retrospective claims, memories of aid, and the obscuring of program sources.

This strategy reveals a subtle form of political conditioning rather than automatically proving electoral control. There is no overt coercion in the accounts examined, but a moral message is perceived to be instilled: aid once arrived; someone deserves credit; support should therefore be considered. In the raw data analysis, residents are said to interpret aid as a personal gift from a leader. The statement "what matters is receiving the aid; we don't care where it comes from" indicates low social rights literacy and weak transparency in distribution. This situation turns residents into rational actors within a skewed system.

Political choices are not merely ideological expressions but survival strategies in a context of limited state access.

This discussion also reveals ambivalence. Not all personal assistance can be immediately viewed negatively, as some genuinely address residents' urgent needs. Tractors, fertilizer, seeds, livestock, free ambulances, housing aid, and business capital provide tangible benefits. Problems arise when these benefits are personalized, claimed, and converted into political loyalty. Kao et al. (2022) show that citizens may view candidates offering community services more positively than handout providers, especially when aid is perceived as genuine service. Justesen et al. (2025) add that low-income voters are more tolerant of clientelism when the practice is packaged alongside pro-poor programs. Kupang Regency demonstrates this pattern concretely: aid does not necessarily appear as crude vote-buying, but as a gesture of care that can generate an expectation of reciprocity and is therefore difficult to refuse.

The main findings of this article indicate that the politics of welfare operates through three mechanisms. First, poverty is framed as an electoral market requiring rapid intervention. Second, social assistance is managed as a political portfolio through private funds, discretionary funds, volunteer networks, government agencies, village heads, and the media. Third, loyalty is maintained through memory, a sense of indebtedness, emotional closeness, and the claim that specific aid is the result of a political figure's struggle. This model is not always formally illegal, but it is democratically problematic because it creates conditions in which aid can shift from a social right into a tool for political conditioning.

The claim concerning transactional democracy is therefore based on a set of explicit indicators rather than on informants' perceptions alone. These indicators are: (1) recipient selection reportedly linked to political affiliation or support; (2) an expressed or implied quid pro quo between assistance and electoral support; (3) distribution or political claiming of assistance in proximity to the election; (4) mediation by campaign teams, brokers, or political figures who personalize access to public programs; (5) the mapping and monitoring of recipients, constituencies, and subsequent electoral results; and (6) retrospective claims that assistance originated from, or should be credited to, a particular political actor. The data provide convergent interview evidence for selective targeting, reciprocal expectations, brokerage, personalization, recipient mapping, and evaluation of electoral returns. However, the study did not directly observe a voter being required to cast a particular ballot, did not verify individual compliance inside the secret ballot, and did not measure a longitudinal increase in electoral transactions across several election cycles. Accordingly, the findings support the conclusion that local democracy exhibits significant transactional tendencies and relational clientelistic practices; they do not establish that every instance of assistance constituted a completed vote purchase or that democracy as a whole has become progressively more transactional over time.

The implications remain serious. When poor residents primarily encounter the state through politically mediated aid, local democracy becomes vulnerable to transactionalization. Bureaucracy loses its neutral face when public programs can be appropriated through elite claims. Candidates are encouraged to adopt an investment logic when assistance is expected to produce electoral returns. The public is not entirely passive either; there are calculations, negotiations, and even a willingness to accept aid without a guarantee of absolute loyalty. However, citizens' calculations take place within the unequal structure of poverty. Therefore, the main issue is not the morality of the poor, but rather the design of social policies and electoral governance that permits the most basic necessities of life to be treated as potential electoral commodities.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social assistance in the 2024 Legislative Election in Kupang Regency functioned not only as a welfare instrument for poverty alleviation but, in the cases documented, was also used and interpreted as electoral capital managed through patronage networks, candidates' personal resources, legislative channels, and bureaucratic intermediaries. This conclusion is supported by several recurring indicators: the selective targeting of politically connected recipients or groups, statements explicitly linking assistance to expected support or repayment, the use of political intermediaries in identifying and reaching recipients, retrospective personal claims over public programs, distribution close to the electoral period, monitoring of recipient networks, and the use of investment-and-return language to evaluate electoral outcomes. These indicators provide evidence of transaction-oriented practices and relational clientelism. They do not, however, establish that every distribution of assistance constituted vote buying or that a completed exchange of assistance for a specific vote occurred in every case. Such caution is necessary because vote buying requires a conceptually identifiable and contingent exchange of targeted benefits for political support, whereas imprecise usage may conflate perceptions, patronage relationships, distributive politics, and verified electoral transactions.

The findings indicate that poverty became an important arena for the operation of local political power. Limited public access to state services encouraged citizens to rely on political actors who were able to facilitate rapid and tangible assistance. Consequently, some informants perceived social assistance not as a social right guaranteed by the state but as a personal favor that generated expectations of gratitude, reciprocity, and political loyalty. These statements constitute evidence of how transactional politics was perceived and morally interpreted by actors in the field. They are not, by themselves, direct proof that recipients cast their ballots in accordance with the provider's expectation. Stronger evidence of an electoral transaction would require corroboration of an explicit or clearly implied offer, the provision or promise of a targeted benefit, a condition of political support, and evidence that the expected reciprocal behavior occurred. Research using survey experiments and indirect measurement has shown that exposure to vote-buying offers and actual contingent voting are analytically distinct outcomes that must be measured separately (Baniya et al., 2024). Therefore, the evidence from Kupang Regency supports the more limited conclusion that local welfare politics displayed transactional tendencies and the personalization of public assistance; it does not demonstrate a general increase in transactional democracy over time or verify completed vote-for-aid exchanges in all reported cases.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on electoral clientelism and welfare politics by introducing the concept of the political business of welfare. This concept explains how social assistance is strategically managed as a political portfolio involving capital allocation, intermediary networks, recipient targeting, and loyalty maintenance within local electoral competition. The concept refers to an observable configuration of political management rather than an assumption that every beneficiary enters a binding electoral bargain. Practically, the study highlights the importance of strengthening transparency, improving social assistance governance, limiting political claims over public programs, and increasing citizens' awareness of social rights.

This study is limited to a single regional case and focuses primarily on qualitative interpretations provided by local political actors, intermediaries, bureaucrats, and aid recipients. It did not directly observe voting behavior, independently verify compliance with alleged political requests, estimate the prevalence of completed electoral exchanges, or employ longitudinal data capable of demonstrating that democracy had become more transactional than in previous elections. Future studies should conduct comparative and longitudinal analyses across regions and combine qualitative evidence with recipient surveys, list experiments, distribution records, electoral-timing data, and systematic comparisons between targeted assistance and voting outcomes. Such designs would make it possible to distinguish more rigorously among perceptions of transactional politics, exposure to clientelistic offers, relational expectations of reciprocity, and verified electoral transactions, as well as to assess the long-term implications of welfare politicization for democratic institutions and public trust.

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