

THE EMPTY BOX PHENOMENON IN THE 2024 SIMULTANEOUS REGIONAL ELECTIONS: DEMOCRACY CHALLENGE OR PEOPLE'S CHOICE?

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ABSTRACT

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The empty box phenomenon in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections is a representation of public dissatisfaction with the quality of candidates and political processes that characterize the local area. This study aims to explore the subjective experiences of voters who will vote for an empty box and the meaning behind their choice. This research uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods to find out the perceptions, motivations, and expectations of voters in areas with a single candidate. Interviews were conducted online with eleven (11) participants selected by purposive sampling with varied age, education, and economic backgrounds using Google Form application with ten (10) structured questions. The results of the study explain the main themes that emerged from the results of thematic analysis include distrust in the quality of candidates, blank votes as a form of protest against the political system, hope for fairer and more transparent elections, and finally social influence in making choices. The findings therefore suggest that this was a kind of protest, not only against one of the candidates, but also an expression of dissatisfaction with the dominance of the local ruling elite. Voters hope that this phenomenon can encourage changes to a more representative electoral system in the future.

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1. Introduction

The empty box phenomenon in Indonesia's general elections has attracted the attention of academics and political practitioners as it reflects a paradox in the democratic process (Rahmanto, 2018). On the one hand, empty boxes provide space for voters to express dissatisfaction with single candidates, but on the other hand, their emergence highlights the weakness of the political selection process and the lack of leadership regeneration at the local level. The term 'empty box' refers to the option available to voters to reject the candidate put forward, without providing a more representative alternative (Nasution et al., 2023). In the context of the 2024 simultaneous regional elections, these elections cover 508 regencies/municipalities and 37 provinces and will be held on Wednesday, November 27, 2024 (KPU, 2024).

The term "empty box" in Indonesia's regional elections refers to an alternative voting option available in regions with only one candidate pair (paslon) running, as regulated under Law No. 10 of 2016 on Regional Elections. This mechanism allows voters to express their dissatisfaction with the sole candidate by choosing the empty box, rather than abstaining from voting. If the empty box secures the majority of votes, the election must be repeated at a later

date determined by the General Election Commission (KPU), and an interim leader will be appointed by the central government to oversee the region until the repeat election (Mardika, 2020). Previous cases, such as the 2018 Makassar regional head election and the 2020 regional head elections in several regions, show that voters do not hesitate to use empty boxes as a form of political resistance. The empty box victory in Makassar in 2018 is one of the most significant examples, where the community collectively rejected the only candidate available, indicating a strong rejection of the lack of diversity of choice (Febrian et al., 2019). In addition, in the 2020 regional elections, many empty box volunteers used cultural approaches such as music to convey political messages and increase voter engagement (Nasution et al., 2023). As a consequence of the empty box victory in the Pilkada, the government will appoint a temporary administrator (PLT) until the Pilkada is held again in the future (Fadhilillah et al., 2023).

Similar phenomena to the empty box in Indonesia are found in India and European countries. In India, the None of the Above (NOTA) option was introduced in 2013 to give voters the option of rejecting all candidates without directly affecting the election outcome. In the 2019 general election, more than 65 million voters chose NOTA as a form of protest against the available candidates (Dasgupta, 2024). In contrast, in Europe, the blank vote is used in countries such as Spain and France to reflect dissatisfaction with the political system. However, this blank vote has no legal consequences on the outcome of the election, unlike the empty box in Indonesia which forces a re-election (Wulandari, 2024).

This phenomenon is often influenced by issues of party regeneration and the dominance of local political elites, where certain figures have full control over nominations. Rohman & Mubarak, (2022) emphasize that this dominance leaves no room for independent and alternative candidates, which triggers the emergence of the empty box movement as a protest. In this context, the empty box is not only a form of passive rejection, but also a symbol of resistance to the injustice and non-transparency of the local political process. In line with the findings of Purwaningsih & Widodo (2021), the existence of empty boxes shows a representation deficit in the local political system, where parties tend to monopolize nominations without providing opportunities for alternative candidates.

In addition, the preference for empty boxes is not only driven by disappointment with existing candidates, but also due to a lack of socialization regarding the right to vote for empty boxes in some areas (Harianto et al., 2020). In fact, in some areas, the empty box became a more structured choice, with support from social movements and local communities encouraging voters to exercise their right to vote as a symbolic statement (Harahap & Kosandi, 2024).

Table 1. List of Candidate Pairs for 37 Empty Box Regions in the 2024 Regional Elections

Regional	Name of Candidate Pair	Supporting Party
Papua Barat	Dominggus Mandacan Mohamad Lakotani	Gerindra, Golkar, PDIP, PKB, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PPP, Hanura, Perindo, Buruh, Garuda, PBB, PSI, Gelora, Ummat
Aceh Utara	Ismail A Jalil Tarmizi	Gerindra, Golkar, PDIP, PKB, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PPP, PSI, Aceh, SIRI, PNA, PAS, PDA
Aceh Tamiang	Armia Pahmi Ismail	Golkar, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PPP, PSI, Aceh, PNA
Asahan	Taufik Zainal Abidin Rianto	Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, Buruh, Gelora

Pakpak Bharat	Franc Bernhard Tumanggor Mutsyuhito Solin	Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, PSI
Serdang Berdagai	Darma Wijaya Adlin Umar Yusri Tambunan	Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, Buruh, Gelora
Labuhanbatu Utara	Hendri Yanto Sitorus Samsul Tanjung	Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, Demokrat, PBB
Nias Utara	Amizaro Waruwu Yusman Zega	PAN, PDIP, Hanura, PSI, Nasdem, Golkar, Gerindra
Dharmasraya	Annisa Suci Ramadhani Leliarni	PAN, PDIP, Hanura, Demokrat, PKS, PKB, Golkar, PPP, Gerindra
Batanghari	Muhammad Fadhil Arief Bakhtiar	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat
Ogan Ilir	Panca Wijaya Akbar H. Ardani	Nasdem, PKS, Hanura, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo, PBB, PSI
Empat Lawang	Joncik Muhammad Arifai	PAN, PDIP, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, Golkar, Gerindra
Bengkulu Utara	Arie Septia Adinata Sumarno	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo
Lampung Barat	Parosil Mabsus Mad Hasnurin	PAN, PDIP, PSI, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra
Tulang Bawang Barat	Novriwan Jaya Nadirsya	Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo, Buruh
Bangka	H. Mulkan Ramadian	PAN, PDIP, Perindo, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PKB, Golkar, PPP, Gerindra
Bangka Selatan	Riza Herdavid Debby Vita Dewi	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Gerindra, Golkar, PPP, Demokrat, PDIP, Perindo, PBB
Kota Pangkal Pinang	Maulan Aklil Masagus M Hakim	PAN, PDIP, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PKB
Bintan	Roby Kurniawan Deby Maryanti	Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, PAN, Golkar, Gerindra, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo, PSI, Gelora
Ciamis	Herdiat Sunarya Yana Diana Putra	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PDIP, PPP, Demokrat, Perindo, Garuda, PKN, Buruh, PBB, Gelora, Ummat
Banyumas	Sadewo Tri Lastiono Dwi Asih Lintarti	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo, Gelora, Ummat
Sukoharjo	Etik Suryani Eko Spto Purnomo	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo, Buruh, PBB, PSI
Brebes	Paramitha Widya Kusuma Wurja	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo, Buruh
Trenggalek	Mochamad Nur Arifin Syah Muhamad Nata Negara	PAN, PDIP, Hanura, Demokrat, PKS, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra

Ngawi	Ony Anwar Harsono Dwi Rianto Jatmiko	Nasdem, Hanura, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo, Gelora
Gresik	Fandi Akhmad Yani Asluchul Alif	Gerindra, Golkar, PDIP, PKB, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PPP, Hanura, Perindo, Buruh, Garuda, PBB, PSI, Gelora, PKN
Kota Pasuruan	Adi Wibowo Mokhammad Nawawi	PAN, PDIP, Hanura, Nasdem, PKS, PKB, Golkar, PPP, Gerindra
Kota Surabaya	Eri Cahyadi Armuji	Gerindra, Golkar, PDIP, PKB, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PPP, Hanura, Perindo, Buruh, Garuda, PBB, PSI, Gelora, PKN, Ummat
Bengkayang	Sebastianus Darwis Syamsul Rizal	PAN, PDIP, Perindo, Hanura, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra
Tanah Bumbu	Andi Rudi Latif Bahsanuddin	PAN, PDIP, Nasdem, PKS, PKB, Gerindra
Balangan	Abdul Hadi Akhmad Fauzi	PAN, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, Golkar, PPP, Gerindra
Kota Samarinda	Andi Harun Saefuddin Zuhri	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, PSI, Gelora
Malinau	Wempi W. Mawa Jakaria	Gerindra, Golkar, PDIP, PKB, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PPP, Hanura, Perindo, PSI, Gelora
Kota Tarakan	Khairul Ibnu Saud	Nasdem, PKS, Hanura, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, Perindo, PSI
Maros	A. S. Chaidir Syam Muetazim	PAN, Hanura, Demokrat, Nasdem, PKS, PKB, Golkar, PBB, Gerindra
Muna Barat	La Ode Darwin Ali Basa	Nasdem, PKS, PAN, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, PBB
Pasangkayu	Yaumil Ambo Djiwa Herny	Nasdem, PAN, Hanura, PKS, PKB, Golkar, Gerindra, PPP, PDIP, Demokrat, PSI

Source: Processed by researchers

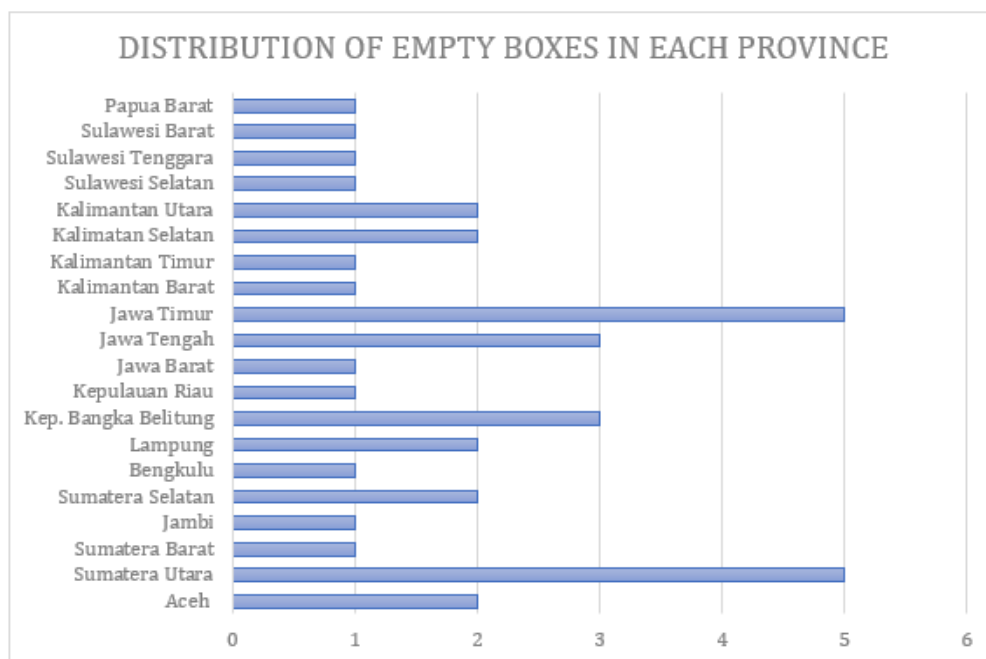


Figure 1. The distribution of empty boxes in the 2024 regional elections in each province

Source: Processed by researchers

The presence of an empty box in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections, involving 37 regions with a single candidate, raises further questions about the quality of democracy in Indonesia (Safa'at, 2022). The high number of single candidates faced by empty boxes is not only a sign of public dissatisfaction, but also a reflection of the failure of political parties to regenerate cadres and select qualified candidates (Afriatni et al., 2024). When the empty box phenomenon evolves from a technical choice to a strong symbol of rejection, it indicates a deficit of trust in the existing political system. In fact, according to Lestari & Rumesten (2019) the existence of empty boxes confirms that major parties are often trapped in political pragmatism, choosing candidates who can win votes instead of considering the quality of leadership and authentic representation.

Therefore, this phenomenon needs to be seen from a broader perspective, where an empty box is not just a technical choice, but a reflection of social and political dissatisfaction with the democratic process at the local level. This phenomenon is also a signal for political parties and local elites to pay more attention to the aspirations of the community if they want to maintain their legitimacy in the future.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach and phenomenological method in data collection used to explore the subjective experiences of voters who will vote for an empty box in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections. This is done because this research aims to understand "lived experience" (Manen, 1990). This approach provides a view of the perceptions, motivations, and meanings that may be felt by a voter and how they give meaning to the empty box phenomenon as a legitimate form of political expression in the dynamics of regional head elections.

Research Design. This research uses descriptive phenomenology which focuses on describing the subjective experiences of participants without providing initial interpretations. This view is in accordance with the concept of epoché from (Husserl, 2012), in which the researcher attempts to suspend (bracketing) all personal judgments and assumptions to capture the essence of the participant's experience. Descriptive phenomenology was used to

identify the deep meaning of the decision to vote for an empty box and the social and political context surrounding it.

This study involved eleven (11) participants who had been selected from various regions facing single-candidate elections in 2024. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which considered demographic diversity, including gender, age, economic background, as well as domicile in accordance with the empty box voter area.

Data Collection Technique. Data collection was conducted online using Google Form by providing structured questions. The use of Google Forms provided flexibility for participants to answer questions anonymously and at a more flexible time. The interview consisted of ten (10) questions, including those that focused on the participants' background, their views on the election process, reasons for voting for the empty box, and their hopes for future changes to the electoral system. Structured questions were chosen to allow participants to freely express their experiences and perspectives, provide clear instructions and allow participants to answer accurately.

Data Analysis Technique. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis method, which focuses on identifying, coding, and interpreting the main themes that emerged from participants' answers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The first step was to transcribe the data from the Google Form responses, then reduce the data (sorting) to sort out information relevant to the research topic. Next, the coding process was carried out to label each segment of data that had a specific meaning, such as "distrust of candidates", "protest against the system", or "hope for a more transparent election". Once the coding process was complete, the main themes that emerged were organized to describe the essence of each experience reported by participants.

3. Results and Discussion

This study involved 11 participants from 6 different regions, namely Ciamis (3 people), Brebes (1 person), Surabaya (4 people), Gresik (1 person), Maros (1 person), and Samarinda (1 person). The participants consisted of 3 men and 8 women, with the majority being in the age range of 18-24 years (7 people), followed by 25-30 years (2 people), 36-40 years (1 person), and more than 55 years (1 person). Based on economic background, 5 participants came from the upper economic class, 1 from the middle class, and 5 from the lower class. Employment status consisted of students (4 people), private employees (3 people), self-employed (1 person), and not working / housewife (2 people). This distribution of participant profiles shows a fairly wide variation, providing diverse perspectives in understanding the empty box phenomenon in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections.

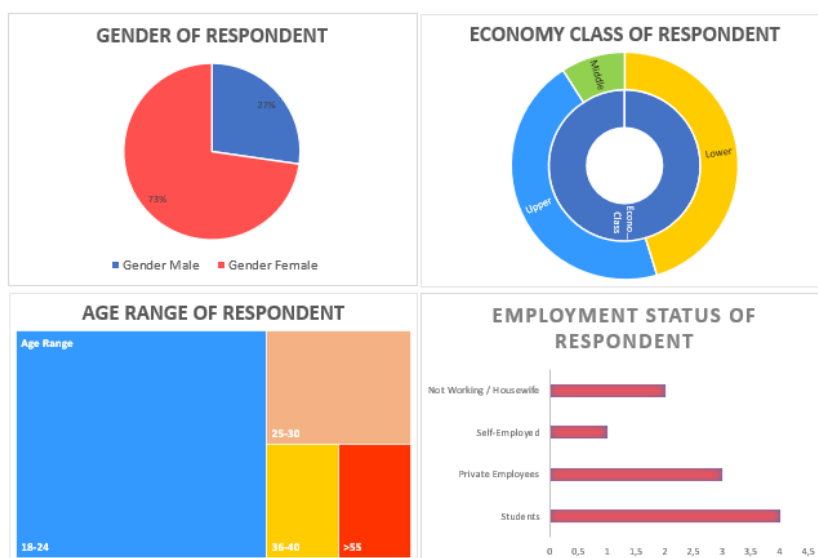


Figure 2. Demographic Distribution of Respondents in the Study

Source: Processed by researchers



Figure 3. Regional Distribution of Participants in Empty Box Areas in the 2024 Pilkada

Source: Processed by researchers

Participants in this study were coded to keep their identities confidential. Codes were used in the format R1, R2, R3, and so on, where each code refers to the order in which the participants were interviewed. For example, R1 refers to the first participant from Ciamis, R2 to the second participant from Surabaya, and so on. These codes were used to facilitate discussion and analysis, and to ensure that each participant's perspective could be clearly identified based on their statements.

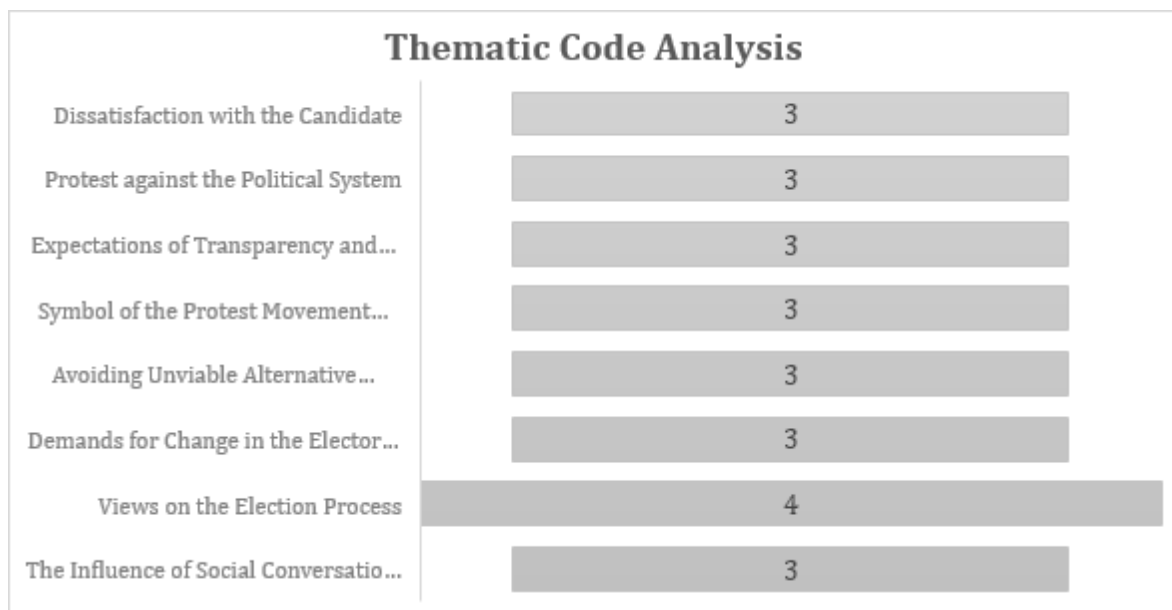


Figure 4. Thematic Code Analysis All of Participants

Source: Processed by researchers

Dissatisfaction with the Candidate. Many participants voted for the empty box because they felt that there were no viable or representative candidates.

1. Comment: "Voting for an empty box in an election is a form of protest or a statement of attitude that reflects dissatisfaction with the existing candidates." (R2)
2. Comment: "The candidates running this time feel like unworthy choices as they have shown no ability to lead. I would rather vote for the empty box." (R5)
3. Comment: "None of the candidates really paid attention to the needs of the community. I was disappointed with the choices, so I voted for the empty box." (R1)

Protest against the Political System. Some participants saw voting for the empty box as part of a broader social movement to protest the system.

1. Comment: "Voting for an empty box can be considered a form of protest against the existing political system in a region, including in Surabaya." (R2)
2. Comment: "The existing political system is very unfair and only favors certain groups, voting for an empty box is the only way to express protest." (R4)
3. Comment: "The empty box shows that we reject the existing system, we need a big change in local politics." (R6)

Expectations of Transparency and Honesty. Many participants hoped that the election process could be more honest and transparent, and in accordance with the law.

1. Comment: "The election process should be more honest and transparent, fulfilling the applicable laws." (R8)
2. Comments: "It's more about being honest, and really making a big change." (R3)
3. Comment: "A lot of fraud occurs in every election, so I hope that in the future elections will be conducted in an open and accountable manner." (R9)

Symbol of the Protest Movement (Empty Box). An empty box is considered a symbol of dissatisfaction and protest against the existing political process.

1. Comment: "Voting for an empty box in an election is a form of protest or a statement of attitude that can reflect dissatisfaction with the existing candidates." (R2)
2. Comment: "I voted for the empty box because it was the only way to show that we are not satisfied with the current political system." (R7)
3. Comment: "The empty box is our form of protest because there is no candidate who truly represents the interests of the people." (R10)

Avoiding Unviable Alternative Options. Participants felt that there was no better alternative candidate, so voting for an empty box was the only way to voice dissatisfaction.

1. Comment: "There is no better choice than an empty box. All candidates are only fighting for personal interests." (R5)
2. Comment: "I voted for the empty box because I felt there was no better alternative. All the candidates were very disappointing." (R7)
3. Comment: "In my area of Gresik there should be one, but the lack of a supporting party has resulted in the inability of the candidate to put himself forward." (R11)

Demands for Change in the Electoral System. Participants hoped for reforms in the electoral system to make it more fair and representative.

1. Comment: "Changing the local election process to make it fairer and more representative is an important step in strengthening democracy and increasing people's trust in the political system." (R2)
2. Comment: "Because the previous one I already felt that there was only a little change, hopefully the next election will provide a very big change." (R3)
3. Comment: "The electoral system must be improved, from transparency to greater public involvement in selecting candidates." (R10)

Views on the Election Process. General views on the electoral process in their region, including opinions on fairness, legitimacy and implementation.

1. Comment: "It's quite interesting, because there is a candidate who is only fighting an empty box." (R1)
2. Comment: "I don't really understand politics, so I can only follow the flow, and my hope is that this year's election can really change Indonesia, especially the small people." (R3)
3. Comment: "In my opinion, there are currently many elections that do not show good democracy with only one candidate against an empty box." (R11)
4. Comment: "I read from the public analysis of the elections in 2024 on Twitter that social media users gave negative and positive answers. There is a lot of enthusiasm, distrust, concern, criticism, hope for the 2024 elections." (R2)

The Influence of Social Conversations on Decisions. The decision to vote for an empty box is influenced by conversations with friends, family or coworkers.

1. Comment: "Yes, they told me that if I vote for the empty box, there will be no candidate for this year's election." (R3)
2. Comment: "By saying they are better and talking about how good they are and how bad the others are." (R4)
3. Comments: "Quite influential because of the explanations from various points of view." (R6)

Distrust of Political Process and Candidate Quality. One of the main findings of this research is participants' distrust of the political process and the quality of candidates who will run in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections. Many participants stated that voting for an empty box was a form of expression of their disappointment with the existing candidates. As expressed by R5, "The candidates running this time feel like an unworthy choice because they don't show the ability to lead. I would rather vote for an empty box." This shows that voters see the empty box as a last resort when they feel that none of the candidates meet their expectations and standards. This condition is exacerbated by the dominance of local elites who block the emergence of more representative alternative candidates, making voters feel forced to vote for an empty box as a form of protest against the limited choice of candidates. This phenomenon is in line with the study of Febrian et al. (2019) which confirms that voter dissatisfaction in the context of the 2018 Makassar regional head election encouraged them to support empty boxes as a form of rejection of single candidates who were considered not credible.

In addition, according to Purwaningsih & Widodo (2021), voter dissatisfaction with a perceived unfair nomination process often leads to support for empty boxes. Voters use empty boxes as a symbol of their distrust of the legitimacy of candidates who are perceived as the result of elitist political compromises.

Empty Box as a Symbol of Resistance to the Political System. For most participants, the empty box was not only considered a technical choice, but also a symbol of resistance to a political system that was considered unfair and non-transparent. Participant R4 from Maros said, "The existing political system is very unfair and only favors certain groups, voting for an empty box is the only way to express protest." This statement reflects a deeper dissatisfaction with the political system as a whole. Voters who vote for an empty box feel that the nomination system in their area has been designed to favor certain groups, leaving no room for candidates who truly represent the voice of the people. This phenomenon suggests that the empty box has become a symbolic medium to campaign against local political power that is perceived as corrupt and indifferent to the interests of the people. According to Nasution et al. (2023) in the 2020 regional elections, the empty box movement developed into a collective symbol to oppose the hegemony of local elites who dominate the nomination process.

Hopes for a Fairer and More Inclusive Electoral Process. Another significant finding was participants' hopes for a fairer and more inclusive electoral process in the future. Participants from various regions, such as Samarinda and Surabaya, expressed a desire for local elections to be more transparent and provide more opportunities for independent candidates who represent the aspirations of the community. Participant R8 said, "The election process must be more honest and transparent, fulfilling the applicable laws." This suggests that support for the empty box reflects not only dissatisfaction with existing candidates, but also a demand to improve the electoral system at the local level. This expectation of change should be pursued systemically, including increased regulation and transparency in candidacy, as well as greater public involvement in the electoral process. As expressed by Purwaningsih & Widodo (2021), transparency in the electoral process and stricter regulations are needed to ensure fairer representation and prevent the manipulation of political power by local actors.

Gender Dynamics in the Empty Box Choice. Although this study involved participants from various backgrounds, including gender, the data shows that voters' perspectives and motivations towards empty boxes are not entirely homogeneous. In the interviews, there were indications that gender factors could influence the reasons behind the decision to vote for an empty box. For example, female participants more often mentioned social influences in decision-making, as expressed by R7 from Gresik, "I discussed a lot with family and friends before deciding to vote for the empty box." This is in contrast to some male participants who tended to emphasize the aspect of dissatisfaction with the system, as stated by R4 from Maros, "The existing political system is very unfair, voting for an empty box is the only way to protest."

This difference suggests that women tend to be more influenced by their social environment in voting, while men focus more on the systemic and structural aspects of dissatisfaction with local politics. In addition, female participants also expressed more hope

for concrete changes in the political system, as expressed by R3 from Surabaya, "I hope that the next election will really provide big changes, especially for small communities."

Exploring these gender dynamics provides additional insights into how social backgrounds, experiences and perceptions of gender can shape motivations and expectations towards empty boxes. Further analysis of gender dynamics could help understand whether certain approaches to voter education or political reform would be more effective for each gender group.

Social Influence and Environmental Support on the Decision to Choose. The decision to vote for an empty box was not only driven by individual factors, but was also influenced by social conversations and support from the surrounding environment. Most participants stated that their decision was influenced by discussions with family, friends and the community. Participant R6 from Surabaya mentioned, "It is quite influential because of the explanation from various points of view." This shows that participants' perceptions and political choices are formed through intensive social interactions, where often "coffee shop" conversations can influence their decisions. In addition, support from the local community in each region also plays an important role in encouraging voters to vote for the empty box as a legitimate and representative choice. This phenomenon is consistent with the findings of Harahap & Kosandi (2024) who highlighted that social support for empty boxes is often triggered by active conversations within the community about the lack of viable candidate options.

The Need for Systemic Reform in Regional Elections. The interviews show that the empty box phenomenon is not just a technical choice, but also reflects deep dissatisfaction with a political system that is perceived as unfair. As R6 from Surabaya put it, "The empty box is a symbol of protest because there is no candidate who truly represents the interests of the people." This dissatisfaction is caused by the dominance of local elites in the nomination process, which often closes off opportunities for independent candidates or more representative alternatives.

Furthermore, R8 from Samarinda emphasized the need for "a more honest and transparent electoral process, in accordance with the law." This expectation reflects the need for systemic improvements, such as increased regulation to ensure a more open and representative candidate selection process. In addition, a lack of trust in the quality of candidates can also affect voter turnout, as R5 from Ciamis expressed, "There is no better choice than an empty box, because all candidates only fight for personal interests."

These trends point to an urgent need for reforms in several aspects of the electoral system. First, the empowerment of independent candidates should be a priority, as the dominance of political parties often results in candidates who are less representative of the people's aspirations. Second, transparency in the nomination process should be improved to prevent political monopoly by certain groups. Finally, voter education about their rights, including voting for an empty box as a form of protest, needs to be improved so that their votes are truly meaningful in the democratic process.

These reforms are not only necessary to prevent the re-emergence of the empty box as a symbol of protest, but also to strengthen the legitimacy of democracy at the local level. With a more open, fair and representative system, public trust in political institutions can be restored, as many interview participants hope. Political system reforms are needed to address

the declining quality of democracy in Indonesia, including the protection of civil liberties, increasing electoral transparency, and strengthening democratic institutions (Febriandy & Wahid, 2024).

4. Conclusion

The empty box phenomenon in the 2024 simultaneous regional elections indicates a deep dissatisfaction with the quality of candidates and the political process at the local level. Support for empty boxes not only reflects voters' disappointment with limited options, but also a form of symbolic protest against a political system that is perceived as unfair, non-transparent, and only benefits certain elite groups. Voters who choose empty boxes see this option as the only way to voice their dissatisfaction and reject passive involvement in elections that are no longer considered to represent the aspirations of the community.

These findings suggest that the empty box serves as a medium of political expression that demands changes in electoral governance, such as improved regulation, transparency, and openness to more representative independent candidates. Voters' expectations of a more inclusive and fair political system reflect the need for deeper reforms at the local level. In addition, the decision to vote for an empty box is also influenced by social factors, where conversations with family, friends and the community play an important role in strengthening support for this choice.

Overall, the empty box phenomenon in the 2024 regional elections indicates that voters are not only rejecting existing candidates, but also demanding greater changes in the local political system. This phenomenon shows that voters want a political system that is more responsive, inclusive and representative of the interests of the wider community, which in turn can strengthen the quality of democracy at the regional level.

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