

Mob Syaeful Bahar^{1}, Mohammad Rifan Firmansyah²*

FACTORS SHAPING FIRST-TIME VOTER CHOICES AMONG SANTRI AND STUDENTS IN *TAPAL KUDA* AREA, EAST JAVA, INDONESIA

^{1*}UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

²University of Vienna, Austria

Email: kakbahar@uinsa.ac.id^{1*}, firmaryam54@univie.ac.at²

Received:
2026-04-11

Received in revised form:
2026-06-03

Accepted:
2026-06-13

Available online:
2026-06-27

Abstract: *This study examines the voting behavior of first-time voters among santri and students in the Tapal Kuda, region within the broader context of democratic participation and local political dynamics in Indonesian East Java. The research addresses how socio-cultural, religious, and contextual factors shape electoral preferences among novice voters who are often influenced by communal ties and authority structures. The purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the key determinants that influence the voting behavior of first-time voters, particularly those affiliated with pesantren and secondary schools. This research employs a qualitative approach, using purposive sampling to select santri and student informants in the Tapal Kuda region. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, allowing for a holistic understanding of perceptions, awareness, and behavioral tendencies related to elections. The findings reveal that the voting behavior of first-time voters is shaped by multiple factors. First, political awareness and knowledge significantly influence the rationality of voting decisions. Second, candidate prominence, including social reputation, wealth, and religious knowledge, becomes an important consideration. Third, geographical proximity fosters familiarity and expectations of regional development benefits. Fourth, candidate performance, particularly physical appearance and perceived authority, affects voter preferences, especially among less politically mature voters. Fifth, emotional bonds derived from shared pesantren, school affiliations, organizational involvement, and kinship relations play a substantial role. Finally, religious considerations strongly shape voter choices, with candidates perceived as religiously knowledgeable gaining greater trust. These findings highlight the interplay between rational evaluation and socio-religious influences in shaping first-time voter behavior in the Tapal Kuda region.*

Keywords: *Voting behavior; First-time voters; Santri; Socio Religious influence; Political participation.*

INTRODUCTION

Among the many prerequisites of democracy is the conduct of elections (James & Alihodzic, 2020). The inevitability of elections is a direct consequence of the notion of power exercised in the name of the people. Some scholars even define democracy by consolidating and integrating several elements, including competitive elections, universal suffrage, regulations that guarantee fairness, and political parties as instruments for representing citizens' interests. In the Indonesian context, following the fall of Soeharto and his extensive political power, the process of democratization found a new footing. Public participation, which had previously existed only as discourse without real manifestation, was reopened, evidenced by the restoration of freedom of association and assembly. One strong indicator of this development was the emergence of numerous political parties competing and contesting elections in the Reformasi era.

In conceptual debates, the implementation of democracy is generally divided into two broad assessments: maximalist democracy and minimalist democracy (Dahl, 1956; Przeworski, 2024). Minimalist democracy refers only to the political dimension and does not extend to other domains such as the economy and culture. This perspective holds that democracy is adequately implemented when, first, there is freedom for individuals and/or groups to compete and contest for power; second, there are guarantees of participation in political processes, both during elections and in policy formulation; and third, there are civil liberties allowing the expression of opinions.

Others argue that such a conception is overly simplistic. Democracy, they contend, is not merely about competition for power in a political arena; rather, it has broader implications with far-reaching effects in economic, social, and cultural spheres. From this perspective, a state cannot be categorized as democratic if it can conduct elections properly but fails to distribute economic and social policy opportunities to minority and marginalized groups. To realize maximalist democracy, the key element is participation—participation by all citizens in safeguarding the democratization process. Citizens should not tire of engaging in political processes. They must recognize that participation represents the embodiment of legitimate political authority derived from the people. By participating in the political system, citizens can channel their interests and influence ruling groups, thereby affecting public policy outcomes. Therefore, political participation can effectively shape the political efficacy (Prats & Meunier, 2021).

The greater the participation of citizens in elections and governance, the more consolidated democracy becomes. Nevertheless, not all participation is always effective. This aligns with the conception of participation as an activity aimed at influencing decision-making, both individually and collectively, in various dimensions (Gherghina, 2025; Nissen, 2021; Nurlinah et al., 2025). Participation does not always occur in organized, collective, or peaceful contexts; it may also take place individually, sporadically, confrontationally, and even ineffectively. In certain cases, such as demonstrations, acts of terror, and other destructive activities, these forms are also considered part of participation.

Does the phenomenon of Golput (abstention) in the Reformasi era indicate a negative correction in the quality of Indonesia's democratization? This question cannot be answered

without theoretically testing the reality. It also raises a further question: why did the Golput phenomenon emerge when democratic opportunities were widely opened? Golput represents a form of societal correction toward the implementation of elections and their consequences. Conceptually, Golput may arise from various factors, primarily psychological and political. Psychological factors are divided into two categories. The first relates to the voter's personality, and the second to personality orientation. The first category reflects apathy and lack of responsibility; for voters with this personality, elections and their dynamics have no implications for their lives. The second emphasizes characteristics such as apathy, anomie, and alienation. These individuals perceive political activity as futile and potentially destructive.

Political reasons, meanwhile, relate to voters' interpretation of political realities. Society perceives that elections have not successfully brought positive change. The behavior of political elites, political parties, and the state has failed to satisfy the public. They are seen as failing to fulfill campaign promises, often accompanied by weak political opposition. When opposition exists, it frequently fails because it is not grounded in adequate study and research, relying instead on fragile intuitive claims. Opposition groups may highlight the weaknesses of ruling elites but fail to offer alternative solutions or better programmatic options.

Studies of voting behavior provide guidance for addressing problems related to elections and voter choices (Fossati, 2025). Many variables can be examined, such as age (Kailash, 2023), welfare level (Bardhan et al., 2024), religious representation (Rosenberg & Smith, 2021), and others. These factors illustrate the scope of voting behavior research. In simple terms, voting behavior can be defined as the instrument shaping individuals' decisions in elections (Kulachai et al., 2023). In political science, two influential schools dominate: the Columbia school and the Michigan school. The Columbia school emphasizes a sociological approach, while the Michigan school prioritizes a psychological approach. The Columbia school argues that political preferences are products of socio-economic characteristics. Thus, political choices are inseparable from economic, social, ideological, ethnic, religious, gender, and class backgrounds.

In contrast, the Michigan school relies on a psychological approach. It assumes that voter decisions cannot be separated from psychological responses. Voters bear psychological considerations when making political choices. Accordingly, several factors are weighed, including candidate personal qualities, the behavior and performance of ruling elites and parties, programmatic issues, and party loyalty.

These factors can also be applied in the Indonesian case. For example, the behavior and performance of ruling elites were evident in the 2004 election. Observers widely predicted the failure of Megawati Soekarnoputri's presidential candidacy. The populist slogan promoted by PDI-P was undermined by Megawati's policy of raising fuel prices early in her administration. The public either did not seek or was unable to find justification for this policy. Expectations that Megawati, as president of the "wong cilik" (common people), would fulfill popular aspirations were unmet. Consequently, as a form of "political

punishment,” PDI-P lost votes to other parties. These two approaches provide adequate tools for analyzing voting behavior in Indonesia. However, the present study focuses on first-time voters, specifically students and santri (Islamic boarding school students). This choice stems from the reality that these voters are often neglected in national political processes.

Nevertheless, questions about first-time voters—both students and santri—risk intellectual inadequacy if based solely on theoretical assumptions without empirical validation. Theoretically, many assume that santri independence in political choice is largely shaped by kiai preferences. In other words, the kiai serves as the primary reference for santri political decisions. Conceptually, this assumption is justifiable, as studies on kiai and santri consistently describe their relationship as patron–client. Santri dependence on kiai extends beyond knowledge and worldly matters (Mustafidin & Thoyib, 2026); santri often believe that the kiai provides guidance toward paths most favored by Allah, making correction of kiai opinions extremely rare.

Based on the above discussion, this research is important for analyzing the voting behavior of santri and students as first-time voters in the context of electoral contests in East Java. Moreover in term of the santri and general Islamic student which represent sise of the youth movement (Kholidi et al., 2024). The study aims to identify factors shaping voting behavior among first-time voters from student and santri groups in the Tapal Kuda region. Although adapted from a 2011 study titled *Voting Behavior of First-Time Voters*, this research remains relevant for offering alternative conceptual contributions to theoretical discourse on santri politics, particularly within the socio-cultural setting of the Tapal Kuda region.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the objectives to be achieved in the research (Mulisa, 2022). Since the analysis seeks to uncover actions underlying human behavior, a qualitative approach is considered appropriate. This approach enables the researcher to examine beliefs, perceptions, awareness, and actions that are externalized yet rooted within individuals, in this case santri and students as first-time voters.

In this study, the researcher adopts the position of an observer, examining the views, perceptions, and behaviors of santri and students, particularly regarding the involvement of kiai and pesantren in practical politics, thereby allowing for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon. The subjects selected purposively in this research consist of several students and santri in the Tapal Kuda region. They were chosen based on a number of relevant criteria. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were used to obtain primary data from santri and students. The interview procedure applied was unstructured interviews, allowing the conversations to flow and develop according to the needs of the research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Voting Behavior

Voting behavior is a study of the actions and inactions of citizens that shape their political participation (Rule, 2023). In relation to the context of voting behavior, Ramlan Surbakti also states that voting behavior is closely related to a series of actions by citizens to make choices, decide whether to participate or abstain in elections, and determine the direction of their preferences—namely, to whom they will channel their trust, whether to individual candidates or to political parties (Saarinen et al., 2020). According to Mochtar Mas'oeed and Colin MacAndrews, voting behavior constitutes a form of conventional collective participation by citizens because it is carried out simultaneously and intended to influence those in power. By participating in elections, citizens exercise one of their rights and contribute to democratic development.

Theoretically, voting behavior has greatly assisted researchers in capturing and understanding voter behavior in many electoral cases, both domestically and internationally, ranging from local elections such as regency/municipal and gubernatorial elections to legislative and presidential elections. Most studies, particularly theoretical ones, begin by defining and categorizing the concept scientifically. Similarly, this research begins with a definition. In simple terms, voting behavior can be defined as a voter's decision to cast a ballot for a particular candidate in either legislative or executive elections. In political science, several approaches or schools are commonly used to analyze voting behavior (Sulaiman et al., 2025), notably the Columbia school with its sociological approach, the Michigan school with its psychological approach, and the rational approach.

The sociological approach, also known as the Columbia School of Electoral Behavior and pioneered by Paul Lazarsfeld (Christensen, 2015), assumes that social groupings and categories strongly influence individual choices. The Columbia school, supported by many European-background political scientists, argues that political preferences—including voting preferences—are products of socio-economic characteristics such as occupation, social class, religion, and other factors. In other words, backgrounds based on gender, social class, race, ethnicity, religion, ideology, and even region of origin function as independent variables influencing voting decisions.

Accordingly, individuals from particular social classes tend to support parties or candidates perceived as representing their class interests. In this sense, the Columbia school is, to a certain extent, synonymous with “politics of streams” (*politik aliran*). Clifford Geertz categorized Indonesian (particularly Javanese) voters into *priyayi*, *santri*, and *abangan* groups. In Europe, especially during the 1970s, this approach was widely referenced by researchers. For example, gender grouping sociologically influenced political preferences, with women at that time tending to support bourgeois parties more than socialist parties.

However, due to several weaknesses—particularly methodological limitations—this approach was later abandoned by many political scientists in the United States, who shifted

to other approaches, notably the Michigan school. The Michigan school analyzes voting behavior using a psychological approach, assuming that individual voting decisions represent psychological responses. These psychological responses are closely related to concepts of socialization and attitudes. From this point of view, psychological reasoning plays a pivotal role in shaping voting behavior (“Voting Behavior, Theories Of,” 2017)

In addition, voters may choose particular candidates because of party identification attached to them. In other words, the strength of a voter’s “emotional attachment” to a political party influences their decision to support candidates from that party. A more economically rational approach also emerged to explain voting behavior. This approach is adapted from economic theory and builds on an analogy between voter rationality and market decision-making. In choosing candidates or parties, citizens consider costs and benefits, similar to mechanisms operating in markets. According to Adman Choi and Lee, this approach positions voters as fully rational decision-makers (Liu et al., 2025).

Santri Reality: Religious Logic in Elections

Many observers have explained the relationship between human beings and their attachment to religion. For instance, Mircea Eliade, as cited by Zifamina, states that humans are living beings who cannot be separated from the dimension of the sacred (Fiamrillah Zifamina, 2022). Religion becomes a determinant and guide for the direction of human life. Experiences and internalization of the sacred reality of God or ultimate reality significantly influence human behavior. Belief in religious truth, along with the sanctions of hell and rewards of heaven, directs individuals to measure good and bad in all life choices.

Max Weber, a prominent sociologist, also addressed this issue. In his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber explained in detail how religion can inherently create economic consciousness and spirit (Weber, 2013). His research began with a fundamental question: why did economic growth occur rapidly in America and Western Europe rather than elsewhere? Weber concluded that this was due to the emergence of a foundational ethos among Protestant reformist groups, particularly Calvinists, in those regions. Protestant teachings encouraged adherents to achieve prosperity in worldly life, as they believed that happiness in the afterlife was closely connected to well-being in this world (Weber, 2013).

In the Indonesian Islamic context, the influence of religious consciousness is tangible. This awareness has produced religious polarization and various implications for social life, including religious organizations, political affiliations, and lifestyle choices. Some individuals who join Muhammadiyah consider themselves modernist Muslims, free from traditions that may compromise Islamic purity. This differs from those affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama, who take pride in their traditions and argue that there is no contradiction between beneficial traditions and authentic Islam.

Variations in religious awareness also shape the political typology of Muslims. There are some typologies of Muslim political thought (Lubis, 2020). For example, the so-called fundamentalist group, which believes Islam is a comprehensive system regulating both

personal and state affairs. This group tends to be rigid, resistant to Western ideas, and skeptical of democracy, which they view as a human creation inferior to divine law. Another is the reformist group, which acknowledges Islamic superiority but remains open to dialogue and secular concepts, emphasizing Islam's adaptability. Finally the accommodationist group, which prioritizes socio-economic interests and is willing to cooperate with secular institutions to secure administrative and political guarantees.

Another study on Islam and politics, as written by Ali Maschan Moesa, outlines three perspectives (Moesa, 2007). The first is the integrated perspective, which does not separate Islam and the state. Thinkers such as Abul A'la Maududi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida support this view, arguing that state sovereignty derives from divine authority. The second perspective is the symbiotic relationship, which sees religion and the state as mutually dependent (Musadad, 2023). This view is associated with thinkers such as Al-Mawardi and Al-Ghazali. The third perspective is secularistic, which separates religion and the state; Ali Abd al-Raziq is a prominent advocate, arguing that religion belongs to the private domain while the state operates in the public sphere.

In the Indonesian context, Moesa, citing Adnan Buyung Nasution, identifies three categories of religion–state relations. The accommodative group, represented by Nurcholish Madjid, separates spiritual life governed by religion from worldly affairs governed by secular logic. His famous slogan, “Islam yes, political Islam no,” reflects this perspective. Among traditionalist Muslims, particularly within Nahdlatul Ulama, Abdurrahman Wahid promoted a similar idea through the *Khittab NU 1926*, emphasizing separation from practical politics. The second category is the modernist group, which views Islam as a comprehensive ideology suitable for politics. The third is the idealist-radical group, which considers Islam the only legitimate ideology, even above Pancasila (Moesa, 2007).

In this research, the political reality of santri indicates that they follow the political thinking of their kiai. In practice, kiai tend to adopt the symbiotic perspective of thinkers such as Al-Mawardi and Al-Ghazali. Consequently, kiai and pesantren communities generally do not contest democratic systems. Elections are viewed as constitutional necessities and consequences of democratic governance. Participation in elections is therefore seen as both a constitutional right and an obligation, contributing to the nation's future. Notably, santri perspectives on democracy and elections often align with the political direction of their kiai.

Within pesantren, the relationship between kiai and santri extends beyond teacher–student interaction; it is often closer than that between parent and child. The kiai is not only a transmitter of knowledge but also a spiritual guide (*mursyid*). This belief—that the kiai's path leads to divine truth—creates strong emotional bonds that encourage santri obedience and alignment with the kiai's political choices.

In this context, santri political participation and awareness are strongly influenced by the kiai. An informant, Ja'far Shodiq, stated that his political choice was essentially the “kiai's political choice.” He identified several reasons: first, kiai possess broader knowledge

and networks; second, kiai political decisions are considered religiously safer; and third, santri believe that kiai will not direct them toward harmful paths. For santri, the educational responsibility of the kiai outweighs any short-term political interest.

Student Reality: Limited Alternative Sources of Information

Unlike santri, students' political realities tend not to involve strong emotional attachments to particular figures, as santri do toward kiai. In other words, students' political ties are relatively looser. In actualizing their political choices, the most common form of intervention experienced by students comes from family members, especially parents. One informant stated that his participation in elections was influenced not only by socialization from the local neighborhood head but also by parental direction. His political choice depended on his parents' preference, which he considered reliable due to their life experience.

Another informant noted that at the student level, both in school and outside, intensive political discussions related to elections rarely occur. Politics is perceived as distant from students' everyday realities and is considered the domain of adults. Conflict, competition, and the dynamics of politics are viewed as unpleasant and "dirty," filled with intrigue (Miklosi, 2026). Students seldom consider that politics determines their future, including educational and economic policies. Instead, politics is seen as an arena of conflict and mutual undermining.

When asked about the atmosphere in schools prior to elections, an informant stated that there were no significant changes. Aside from brief information provided by teachers near election day, there were no further discussions about elections. As a result, many students were unaware of candidates contesting local elections.

Similar views were expressed by other informants. For them, local elections had little effect on students, aside from participation in campaign-related festivities. The lack of information and political education was identified as the primary cause of student apathy toward elections. One informant admitted he did not understand his constitutional rights and obligations related to elections and viewed elections merely as moments for leadership change, without deeper meaning.

Due to limited information and political education, first-time voter participation among students tends to be weak. Although they may attend polling stations, their choices are rarely based on rational consideration. Consequently, their votes often become targets for political parties or candidate pairs. From a quantitative perspective, their votes are significant, and politically they are perceived as more easily influenced (Azevedo & Salomão, 2025). Based on in-depth interviews, the researcher concluded that students rarely receive comprehensive and adequate information about elections. Informants in Jember also confirmed that even in a large city, scientific discussions about politics, particularly elections, are rare. Political education programs are usually initiated by university students rather than facilitated by government institutions.

Students typically obtain political information only through school subjects such as civic education. One informant, also a journalist, emphasized that limited information and

knowledge about elections are the primary factors behind weak student participation. Nevertheless, a positive finding emerged: students tend not to be strongly attached to specific political parties. They do not fall into the category of traditional voters bound by ideological or interest-based affiliations. This distinguishes them from older voters, who are often tied to ideology, religion, historical experience, or other interests. If first-time voters receive adequate political information, their votes could become decisive in elections.

The same informant proposed several recommendations. First, the government should provide adequate political training so that first-time voters are not easily influenced by short-term political interests. Second, the government should facilitate access to election-related information. Third, election socialization should be delivered in youth-friendly formats, such as music events.

The issue of limited information among first-time voters is also discussed in political science literature. The behavioral decision theory explains that individuals function as limited information processors. This perspective suggests that individuals have restricted capacity to process information, often referred to as bounded rationality. Such limitations include constraints in receiving, storing, and retrieving information. These constraints must be managed to minimize their impact on rational voting decisions.

Factors Shaping the Voting Behavior of First-Time Voters

1. Awareness and Knowledge Regarding Elections

Most informants stated that political awareness and adequate knowledge about elections significantly influenced their attitudes. Both participatory and apathetic informants acknowledged that awareness and knowledge were key determinants of their political choices. One informant noted that his involvement in elections was not based on sufficient political awareness or knowledge; consequently, he had little expectation from the electoral process. He did not realize that elections allow citizens to directly evaluate political elites and that electoral correction is an effective mechanism for selecting qualified leaders. As a result, his voting decision was not based on careful political calculation.

Another informant admitted that political awareness and understanding of the significance of elections strongly influenced his participation. His family background, characterized by political involvement and frequent discussions, helped him become politically literate. Consequently, during elections he possessed sufficient references to make an informed choice. Based on interviews, the researcher concluded that, for a high school student and first-time voter, this informant demonstrated relatively rational decision-making.

Viewing voting as either an obligation or a constitutional right also directly affected first-time voter behavior. Those who considered voting a duty tended to participate merely to fulfill an obligation, without considering the long-term consequences of their choices. In contrast, those who viewed voting as a constitutional right tended to

evaluate the broader implications of elections, at least for their personal interests. This latter group also showed a tendency to seek information about party platforms and candidate programs. Understanding policy substance became an important basis for making decisions.

The research findings indicate that instruments for political education capable of stimulating political awareness among first-time voters are limited. Both santri and student first-time voters share similar challenges. This differs from student informants at the university level. Interviews and observations suggest that campus life offers more opportunities for political learning. Even when living in pesantren, university students frequently engage in political discussions. Such discussions occur not only within formal student bodies, such as the student executive board and departmental associations, but also in extracurricular organizations and informal study groups.

This situation contrasts with student first-time voters at the secondary school level. Observations reveal that, aside from dense academic schedules, supporting organizations are limited. The student council rarely initiates activities related to political education, focusing instead on cultural and artistic events such as music performances, theater, and marching bands. When training programs are offered, they tend to emphasize leadership or journalism rather than political literacy.

2. Leadership Figure

Another factor influencing first-time voters is the personal prominence or leadership figure of candidates. This consideration was expressed by both informed and less-informed informants. For many, candidate prominence serves as an initial source of information regarding track records. One informant explained that prominence is shaped by a candidate's past experiences and cannot emerge instantly. According to the informant, four pathways commonly shape a person's prominence.

First, involvement in community organizations. Organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah provide opportunities for individuals to become community leaders. These organizations contribute significantly through educational, health, and religious services, and their leaders often gain public recognition. Second, political party involvement. Political parties, especially those in power or with strong bargaining positions in legislative institutions, can rapidly elevate individuals and construct their prominence.

Third, personal wealth. Economic resources, particularly when combined with social concern and ethical conduct, can also contribute to leadership recognition. Fourth, knowledge, especially religious knowledge. Mastery and practice of religious teachings in society can establish a respected leadership status.

Some first-time voters believe that candidate prominence guarantees quality. The process through which prominence develops is perceived as evidence of competence demonstrated over time. One informant described choosing a candidate without prominence as "buying a cat in a sack," emphasizing the importance of track records. According to this view, prominence provides voters with information about behavior,

quality, and commitment. Candidates without prominence are seen as lacking evaluable track records.

An interesting finding concerns santri cognitive perspectives. For them, prominence—particularly derived from religious knowledge and practice—is highly important. This logic stems from the belief that religious leaders not only understand religion but also guide society toward truth, peace, and well-being. One informant admitted that although he did not personally know the candidate, he followed the preference of a respected kiai. His choice was based entirely on the belief that the kiai's decision was the most appropriate from a religious standpoint.

3. Geographical Proximity

In the implementation of elections, particularly local elections, the geographical proximity between candidates and voters plays a significant role. This finding emerged from interviews with informants and field observations. Several informants indicated that geographical closeness between themselves and a candidate influenced their voting decisions. One fundamental reason expressed by these informants was that if the candidate were elected, they would feel proud as residents of the same area.

Second, communication patterns, campaign activities, and commitment contracts are considerably easier and less costly when conducted in nearby areas. As noted earlier, elections, especially local elections, require substantial financial resources from candidates. Over time, financial capacity has become one of the determining factors of electoral victory. Therefore, candidates who maximize campaigns in their immediate geographical areas can reduce campaign costs. Initial introduction processes become unnecessary, and transportation expenses can be minimized to achieve greater efficiency.

4. Performance

In an interview with one informant, an interesting expression was recorded by the researcher. The Madurese phrase, “Mak miliah degeng sate, mon bisa mileh guru ngajih,” became popular in Bondowoso Regency prior to the local regent election. The expression roughly means, “Why choose a satay seller when you can choose a religious teacher.” This form of black campaign was directed at a regent candidate whose performance was considered inadequate. Although the candidate eventually won the election and became regent of Bondowoso, the issue and negative campaign concerning performance were effective in shaping public opinion.

At the national political level, performance also becomes a key consideration for voters. In an interview, one informant stated that the contest between Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Jusuf Kalla in the 2009 presidential election was strongly influenced by performance considerations. Although Jusuf Kalla had demonstrated decisiveness and political competence, his perceived performance was considered less convincing than that of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Consequently, many voters, particularly women, preferred Yudhoyono.

The researcher's observations indicate that voters who prioritize performance tend to be those with less mature political analysis. In such cases, issues, policy proposals, and track records become complementary considerations following performance as the primary factor. Some informants emphasized that performance is particularly important in presidential elections. According to them, the president symbolizes the state and represents national image in international relations. If the leader's image is weak, it may become difficult to build equal relations with other countries. According to informants, performance also influences a leader's authority. A leader, such as a regent, might be perceived as less authoritative if physical appearance is considered inadequate. One informant argued, for example, that a regent of short stature might appear less commanding when instructing taller security officers.

However, another group of informants expressed a different view. They argued that while performance cannot be entirely removed from voter logic, it should not overshadow substantive considerations. Voter preferences may still incline toward candidates with better performance, but the key distinction between rational and traditional voters lies in the weight given to this factor. Traditional voters tend to prioritize performance over issues and programs, whereas rational voters consider policy issues and programmatic commitments as the most important aspects to evaluate before making electoral decisions.

5. Emotional Bonding

Emotional proximity between voters and candidates is one of the factors influencing the choices of first-time voters. For these voters, emotional closeness may originate from primordial ties and kinship relations. The research process identified several primordial sources that can create emotional bonds between voters and candidates. First, shared pesantren alma mater. This phenomenon is relatively easy to observe in the Tapal Kuda region.

Political conflicts among kiai in the Tapal Kuda region provide strong evidence of emotional bonds among alumni of the same pesantren. Each pesantren alumnus tends to possess a strong sense of brotherhood. This bond is shaped not only by the influence of the kiai, who serves as a unifying figure, but also by the shared history experienced during years of living together in the pesantren. Such long-term communal experiences are rarely found in other educational settings. The shared living environment, common sources of knowledge in the form of classical Islamic texts, and relationships with the same kiai strengthen these ties.

According to one informant, during the Probolinggo regent election there was a difference between his voting preference and that of his family. Most family members, including his parents, supported Hasan Aminuddin, whereas he voted for Kholili Mugi, who was supported by the majority of santri and alumni from the same pesantren alma mater, namely PP. Nurul Jadid Paiton. Similar patterns were also observed in the regent elections of Bondowoso and Situbondo.

6. Religious Factor

For most people in the Tapal Kuda region, personal virtue is often associated with knowledge and behavior consistent with religious teachings, particularly Islam. Individuals with strong religious understanding are considered more trustworthy and reliable. This perception operates across various aspects of social life, ranging from selecting prospective spouses and neighbors to choosing political leaders. A Madurese expression states that a knowledgeable person without religious grounding may behave dishonestly, whereas a religious scholar is unlikely to act dishonestly because of obedience and fear of God.

The behavior of many Tapal Kuda communities is reflected in the electoral success of pesantren-based political parties. Parties with strong Islamic boarding school affiliations have achieved significant electoral results in several regions. In Bondowoso, campaign slogans emphasizing alignment with religious scholars proved highly effective in shaping voter emotions. Such messaging provided voters with reassurance that their choices were consistent with religious values.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and data analysis, this study concludes that the voting behavior of first-time santri and student voters in the Tapal Kuda region is influenced by multiple factors. The first factor is awareness and knowledge regarding elections. The research found that higher levels of political awareness and knowledge correspond to more rational voting behavior, and vice versa. The second factor is candidate prominence, which may be shaped by wealth, social activities, good personal conduct, and intellectual capacity. The third factor is geographical proximity. This factor emerges because voters possess greater familiarity with nearby candidates and believe that shared regional origins may lead to prioritized development programs. The fourth factor is candidate performance. This factor was acknowledged by all informants, although with varying degrees of importance. The fifth factor is emotional bonds between voters and candidates. These bonds arise from shared pesantren or school alma mater, involvement in the same organizations, and kinship relations. The final factor is the religious background of the candidate

REFERENCES

- Azevedo, F. G., & Salomão, M. (2025). The Impact That Political Social Media Marketing Causes on Young Portuguese Voters: A Quantitative Study About Voting Intentions. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2025.2596597>
- Bardhan, P., Mitra, S., Mookherjee, D., & Nath, A. (2024). How do voters respond to welfare vis-à-vis public good programs? Theory and evidence of political
- At-Turas: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*
E-ISSN: 2460-1063, P-ISSN: 2355-567X
Volume 13, No. 2, June 2026

- clientelism. *Quantitative Economics*, 15(3), 655–697. <https://doi.org/10.3982/QE2315>
- Christensen, M. (2015). Reestablishing “The Social” In Research On Democratic Processes: Mid-Century Voter Studies And Paul F. Lazarsfeld’s Alternative Vision: Reestablishing The Social In Democracy Research. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 51(3), 308–332. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jhbs.21731>
- Dahl, R. A. (1956). *A preface to democratic theory*. University of Chicago press.
- Fiamrillah Zifamina, I. (2022). Yang Sakral, Mitos, dan Kosmos: Analisis Kritis atas Fenomenologi Agama Mircea Eliade. *Panangkaran: Jurnal Penelitian Agama Dan Masyarakat*, 6(1), 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.14421/panangkaran.v6i1.2806>
- Fossati, D. (2025). What Drives Voting Behavior in Southeast Asia? Evidence from Candidate Choice Experiments in Five Countries. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 44(3), 436–460. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034251334253>
- Gherghina, S. (2025). Political Parties and Forms of Citizens’ Involvement in Decision-Making: A Special Section. *Political Studies Review*, 23(3), 694–699. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14789299241307218>
- James, T. S., & Alihodzic, S. (2020). When Is It Democratic to Postpone an Election? Elections During Natural Disasters, COVID-19, and Emergency Situations. *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy*, 19(3), 344–362. <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2020.0642>
- Kailash, K. K. (2023). Age and Party Choice: Generational Shift in India. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 11(2), 208–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23210230231203784>
- Kholidi, I., Umam, F., Wazis, K., & Jali, H. (2024). Young People and the Fragmentation of Religious Authority: Study of Youth Movements and the Spirit of Islamic Da’wah in Indonesia. *AT-TURAS: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 11(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.33650/at-turas.v11i1.7986>
- Kulachai, W., Lerdtomornsakul, U., & Homyamyen, P. (2023). Factors Influencing Voting Decision: A Comprehensive Literature Review. *Social Sciences*, 12(9), 469. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090469>
- Liu, H., Li, Q., Gao, C., Cao, Y., Xu, X., Wu, X., Hershovich, D., & Gu, J. (2025). Beyond Demographics: Enhancing Cultural Value Survey Simulation with Multi-Stage Personality-Driven Cognitive Reasoning. *Proceedings of the 2025 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, 18417–18439. <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2025.emnlp-main.928>
- Lubis, A. A. A. M. R. (2020). Religious Nation State: Bahtiar Effendy and Islamic Political Thought. *Millah*, 19(2), 167–198. <https://doi.org/10.20885/millah.vol19.iss2.art1>
- Miklosi, Z. (2026). Perversity, futility, complicity: Should democrats participate in autocratic elections? *American Journal of Political Science*, ajps.70049. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.70049>

- Moesa, A. M. (2007). *Nasionalisme keiai: Konstruksi sosial berbasis agama* (Cet. 1). IAIN Sunan Ampel Press ; LKiS : Distribusi, LKiS Pelangi Aksara.
- Mulisa, F. (2022). When Does a Researcher Choose a Quantitative, Qualitative, or Mixed Research Approach? *Interchange*, 53(1), 113–131. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-021-09447-z>
- Musadad, A. (2023). The Relationship of Religion and State Law in Indonesia Paradigm Theory Perspective of the Relationship Between Religion and the State. *AT-TURAS: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 10(2), 343–362. <https://doi.org/10.33650/at-turas.v10i2.6934>
- Nissen, S. (2021). Political Participation: Inclusion of Citizens in Democratic Opinion-forming and Decision-Making Processes. In W. Leal Filho, A. M. Azul, L. Brandli, A. Lange Salvia, P. G. Özuyar, & T. Wall (Eds.), *Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions* (pp. 1–12). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71066-2_42-1
- Nurlinah, Ansar, M. C., Megawati, S., & Chowdhury, K. (2025). Divided by class: Government perception and political participation in Indonesia and Bangladesh. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 7, 1673531. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1673531>
- Prats, M., & Meunier, A. (2021). *Political efficacy and participation: An empirical analysis in European countries* (OECD Working Papers on Public Governance 46; OECD Working Papers on Public Governance, Vol. 46). <https://doi.org/10.1787/4548cad8-en>
- Przeworski, A. (2024). Defending Democracy. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4701964>
- Rosenberg, E., & Smith, A. E. (2021). What Drives Religious Politicking? An Analysis of 24 Democratic Elections. *Politics and Religion*, 14(4), 735–763. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048320000644>
- Rule, S. (2023). Voting Behavior. In F. Maggino (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (pp. 7569–7571). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-17299-1_3181
- Saarinen, A., Koivula, A., & Keipi, T. (2020). Political trust, political party preference and trust in knowledge-based institutions. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 40(1/2), 154–168. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSSP-06-2019-0113>
- Sulaiman, S. M. I., Rahmatunnisa, M., Bainus, A., & Umam, A. K. (2025). Voting behavior in Asian democracies: A comprehensive synthesis of contemporary research. *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan Dan Politik*, 38(2), 139–155. <https://doi.org/10.20473/mkp.V38I22025.139-155>

- Voting Behavior, Theories of. (2017). In F. M. Moghaddam, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n408>
- Weber, M. (2013). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (S. Kalberg, Ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315063645>