



The Politics of Mobilizing Pro-Democracy Citizens in the Empty-Box Voting Movement in the 2024 Pangkalpinang Local Election

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	A B S T R A C T
<p>Received: September 17, 2025 Revised: March 23, 2026 Accepted: March 28, 2026 Available online: April 23, 2026</p>	<p>This article analyzes the politics of mobilizing support for the empty-box option in the 2024 Pangkalpinang local election, positioning it as a form of citizens' electoral resistance to the narrowing of competition under single-candidate dominance. Using a descriptive qualitative approach through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis the study maps: (1) patterns of mobilization and volunteer networks, (2) movement resources (socio-cultural capital) and their negotiation with elite political capital, and (3) policy implications arising from regulatory gaps after an empty-box victory. The findings show that mobilization was organic and grew through cross-class community nodes (e.g., BOTAK, PKK, and Baju KOKO), supported by cultural framing, network-based communication (WhatsApp/social media), and solidarity practices that substituted for conventional political logistics. At the same time, the empty-box victory unfolded within local power relations in which political capital and kinship politics shaped the opportunity structure and narrowed formal channels of competition. The article offers recommendations to strengthen the governance of single-candidate local elections: clarifying the status and rights of the empty box in electoral regulation, strengthening internal party democracy, and developing mechanisms to prevent nomination cartelization so that electoral competition remains meaningful.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

This study advances the theoretical understanding of local democracy by examining citizen mobilization under conditions of constrained electoral competition, particularly within the institutional context of single-candidate elections. Drawing on debates on democratic competition and party cartelization, it conceptualizes single-candidate Pilkada not merely as procedural anomalies but as outcomes of structured elite coordination that reshape the incentives and capacities for citizen participation. In this regard, the study underscores important governance implications, especially the urgency of regulatory reform to restore electoral competitiveness, safeguard political pluralism, and strengthen accountability mechanisms in local elections. Nonetheless, the analysis is bounded by its reliance on a single-case qualitative design, which prioritizes in-depth contextual insight over broad generalizability.

Direct local elections for regional heads (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah/Pilkada*) constitute a key institutional mechanism in Indonesia's post-Reformasi democratic system, aimed at strengthening popular sovereignty, accountability, and responsiveness at the local level. As part of broader decentralization reforms, Pilkada were expected to deepen democracy by enabling citizens to directly select their leaders and hold them accountable (Buehler, 2010; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019). In principle, competitive elections serve as a cornerstone of democratic governance, ensuring meaningful representation and political alternation.

However, recent developments point to a decline in electoral competition, most notably reflected in the increasing prevalence of single-candidate elections. In these cases, voters are presented with a limited choice between a sole candidate and an empty ballot box, undermining the essence of democratic contestation. This phenomenon signals a deeper structural issue in local

politics, where electoral processes no longer function as arenas of genuine competition but rather as mechanisms of elite consolidation (Mietzner, 2015; Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

The rise of single-candidate elections is closely linked to the cartelization of political parties, whereby parties coordinate to support a dominant candidate instead of competing against one another. This pattern reflects the increasing pragmatism and transactional nature of party politics in Indonesia, often driven by resource mobilization, patronage networks, and strategic alliances among elites (Mietzner, 2015; Slater, 2018). As a result, political pluralism weakens, limiting voters' meaningful choices and undermining representation and accountability at the local level (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019).

Despite a growing body of literature on decentralization, clientelism, and party cartelization in Indonesia, limited attention has been paid to how single-candidate Pilkada reshape democratic practices and institutional dynamics at the local level. This gap is particularly important given the implications of declining electoral competition for democratic legitimacy, citizen participation, and governance outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the political and institutional drivers of single-candidate elections and to assess their broader consequences for local democracy in Indonesia.

The victory of the empty box is theoretically significant as it captures multiple dimensions of democratic dynamics under conditions of constrained electoral competition. First, it can be understood as a form of electoral resistance, through which voters actively reject the absence of meaningful alternatives and reaffirm their political agency within limited institutional choices (Norris, 2014). Second, it reflects a broader pattern of democratic backsliding, marked by the erosion of electoral competitiveness and political pluralism as party cartelization and elite coordination transform elections into plebiscitary exercises

(Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Schedler, 2002). Third, the empty box functions as a corrective mechanism within constrained competition, introducing a minimal institutional safeguard that allows voters to withhold legitimacy and reintroduce uncertainty into otherwise predetermined outcomes, thereby preserving a residual form of accountability in imperfect democratic settings (Norris, 2014; Schedler, 2002).

The possibility of empty-box victory introduces an element of uncertainty into otherwise predetermined electoral outcomes, thereby preserving a residual form of democratic accountability. Taken together, these perspectives position the empty-box phenomenon not only as an anomaly in electoral practice but as a critical lens through which the tensions between citizen agency, elite domination, and institutional design in contemporary local democracy can be understood.

An empty-box victory does not only signal rejection of a single candidate; it also indicates a proactive public that seeks a healthier and more meaningful democracy. The vote-empty-box movement becomes a new form of political expression that is not merely symbolic but also carries critical meaning toward local political practices often dominated by elites and oligarchic arrangements.

This phenomenon raises important questions about how citizens can mobilize voluntarily and creatively in a constrained political context, and how they use the empty-box option to express dissatisfaction and hopes for better democracy. This study responds to that need by exploring the forms of civil-society mobilization, the factors supporting the empty-box victory, and the political and institutional implications arising from the event. The study also aims to formulate policy recommendations that can strengthen competitive and participatory electoral democracy in the future.

Although many studies have examined Pilkada and single-candidate races, most focus on legal design, elite coalition-making, or aggregate voter behavior. Existing work on local contestation and inter-ethnic political accommodation in Bangka Belitung, for example, highlights how economic and symbolic resources shape local power-sharing but pays less attention to how citizens organize collective resistance when competition collapses (Ibrahim et al., 2022).

Research on the empty-box mechanism has largely focused on normative-legal debates or specific case outcomes (Kurniawan & Wawanudin, 2019), leaving the micro-dynamics of grassroots mobilization underexplored. Studies of digital-era collective action suggest that connective and personalized networks can lower coordination costs and accelerate participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), yet how such patterns operate in an empty-box campaign remains insufficiently documented.

Therefore, this study offers novelty by focusing on civil-society movements that emerge organically and creatively as a form of resistance to elite domination in a single-candidate context. The case of the empty-box victory in Pangkalpinang provides a timely and relevant empirical focus and offers both empirical and conceptual contributions to scholarship on local democracy in Indonesia.

This study adopts several key theories as an analytical framework. First, New Social Movement Theory enables analysis of the empty-box movement as a political expression grounded in values, identity, and collective morality. The movement is not only resistance to power structures, but also a manifestation of new aspirations and cultural change in local politics.

Second, Institutional Theory is used to examine how regulations and institutional structures, including election rules and party policies shape opportunities and constraints for the emergence of single-candidate races and for public responses to the phenomenon.

Third, Beetham's theory of political legitimacy provides a framework for assessing the validity of, and public acceptance for, election outcomes, especially in legitimacy crises produced by single candidates and empty-box victories.

Based on the background and theoretical framework above, this study addresses two main research questions:

- 1). What were the strategies of citizen mobilization in the vote-empty-box movement in the 2024 Pangkalpinang local election?
- 2). How does electoral regulation respond to the dynamics of single-candidate Pilkada, and what are the consequences for democratic consolidation?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design because it allows in-depth exploration of the experiences and meanings constructed by citizens in the vote-empty-box movement in the 2024 Pangkalpinang local election. A qualitative approach was selected to produce a comprehensive account of political mobilization dynamics that are not easily captured through quantitative measurement.

This study employs a qualitative approach as it enables an in-depth exploration of complex and context-dependent phenomena such as grassroots mobilization, informal political networks, and civic activism. These phenomena involve social processes, subjective meanings, and interactions among actors that are not easily captured through quantitative measurement, thereby requiring an interpretive approach to uncover the underlying dynamics. Through this approach, the study seeks to examine the motivations, strategies, and power relations that shape political practices at the local level in a more comprehensive manner (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The research site is Pangkalpinang City in the Bangka Belitung Islands Province. The site was purposively selected because the empty box's victory in the 2024 local election is rare and nationally salient. The research focuses on pro-democracy citizen groups organized across several community formations such as Barisan Oposisi Kotak Kosong (BOTAK), Partai Kotak Kosong (PKK), Baju KOKO, and Pemuda Pangkalpinang Bersuara—that actively encouraged participation in voting for the empty box.

The study draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants, including movement figures and activists who played strategic roles in mobilizing citizens. In addition, the researcher conducted participant observation of empty-box movement activities in the field and recorded relevant social phenomena during the research period. Secondary data were obtained from official government documents, election archives, mass media coverage, academic literature, and regulations related to single-candidate local elections and the empty-box phenomenon.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling. The main criteria were active involvement in the empty-box movement and holding a strategic position in supporting communities. This approach was intended to obtain rich and relevant information about mobilization strategies and the factors behind the empty-box victory.

Data collection consisted of two main techniques. First, semi-structured interviews were used to explore informants' perspectives, motivations, and experiences in depth. Second, documentary analysis involved collecting and analyzing archives, news reports, regulations, and photographs related to the 2024 local election to provide broader contextual grounding.

Data analysis was conducted continuously and systematically using triangulation comparing and cross-checking data from interviews, observations, and documents to ensure the credibility and reliability of findings. The process included interview transcription, repeated reading, reflective note-taking, and thematic categorization and mapping. Findings are presented as a descriptive narrative highlighting patterns of mobilization, drivers of the empty-box victory, and the political and policy implications arising from the phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political development and democratic governance in Indonesia will always be confronted with social diversity, across ethnic groups, religions, cultures, and social groupings throughout the archipelago (Hidayat et al., 2021). Likewise, in Pangkalpinang citizens' mobilization to vote for the empty box was one of the challenges of democratic governance. This study finds that the pro democracy citizen movement to vote for the empty box in the 2024 Pangkalpinang local election resulted from social mobilization involving diverse local communities in a voluntary and organic manner.

The movement was not driven by party machines; instead, it was propelled by citizen networks consolidated through community nodes. Interviews with key figures indicate that volunteers came from diverse backgrounds (housewives, retirees, activists, and academics), with primary motivations including democratic awareness, social solidarity, and rejection of single-candidate dominance.

Mobilization was carried out through routine meetings, public discussions, and intensive message dissemination via WhatsApp and social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Citizens organized themselves in community nodes such as Barisan Oposisi Kotak Kosong (BOTAK), Partai Kotak Kosong (PKK), Baju KOKO, and Pemuda Pangkalpinang Bersuara. Solidarity and collective awareness of the importance of democracy rather than material incentives became the main drivers of participation.

Mobilization unfolded not only in formal arenas but also through strong informal social networks. Communication and idea diffusion occurred through routine meetings, open discussions, and everyday social interactions. Social media and messaging platforms such as WhatsApp expanded outreach, enabling the campaign to reach wider segments of society and to build a viral narrative of resistance to the single-candidate contest. These findings align with New Social Movement perspectives (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996), which emphasize the centrality of collective identity and network communication in contemporary social movements.

The findings demonstrate that the movement was primarily driven by community networks rather than formal party structures, reflecting key characteristics of New Social Movement (NSM) theory. Unlike conventional political mobilization that relies on party organization and material incentives, this movement emerged from grassroots initiatives rooted in shared democratic concerns, indicating a shift from party-centered politics toward citizen-driven collective action.

First, the movement exhibits strong elements of identity-based mobilization. Participation was not primarily motivated by material benefits, but by a shared commitment to democratic values and resistance against the perceived unfairness of a single-candidate election. This collective identity centered on defending electoral integrity and meaningful political choice served as a unifying force that encouraged sustained participation, in line with NSM perspectives emphasizing values and collective consciousness (Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996).

Second, the movement reflects a pattern of decentralized organization, with citizens forming multiple autonomous community nodes such as BOTAK, PKK, and other local groups without hierarchical coordination from political parties. This horizontal structure enabled flexibility, inclusiveness, and reduced dependence on elite control, illustrating a departure from traditional, top-down political mobilization.

Third, the movement relies heavily on network-based communication, where mobilization unfolded through informal social networks and was amplified by digital platforms such as WhatsApp and social media. These channels facilitated rapid information exchange, coordination, and the construction of a shared narrative of resistance. This pattern aligns not only with NSM theory but also with the concept of connective action, which emphasizes digitally mediated, personalized forms of participation that operate through flexible communication networks rather than formal organizational structures (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

However, while NSM provides a useful framework, it may not fully capture the complexity of the Indonesian context. NSM theory tends to emphasize post-materialist values and highly autonomous civil society actors, whereas local political dynamics in Indonesia remain intertwined with patronage networks, informal power relations, and hybrid forms of mobilization. In this case, although the movement demonstrates identity-driven and decentralized characteristics, it still operates within a broader political environment shaped by elite influence and institutional constraints. Therefore, integrating NSM with the connective action framework offers a more nuanced explanation, as it accounts for the role of digital communication in enabling flexible, networked participation while acknowledging the coexistence of informal structures and contextual specificities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the empty-box movement represents a hybrid form of contemporary civic activism, combining elements of identity-based collective action with digitally enabled network mobilization, thereby contributing to broader debates on the transformation of democratic participation in constrained electoral settings. Cultural strategy played a central role in strengthening solidarity and the movement's appeal. Simple narratives such as "Reject the Single Candidate" and "Asal Bukan Molen" (Anything but Molen), delivered through local language, humor, and Bangka cultural symbols (e.g., *pantun* and culinary references), made political messages easily accessible and embedded in everyday life. From the perspective of movement framing theory, these slogans function as *collective action frames* that simplify complex political issues into resonant and relatable messages, thereby facilitating broader participation and alignment among diverse actors (Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow et al., 1986). Empirically, interview findings indicate that participants perceived these slogans not only as political statements but also as everyday expressions that circulated organically in informal conversations, social gatherings, and digital communication spaces. In this

sense, the slogans operated as both diagnostic frames identifying the problem of a single-candidate election and motivational frames that encouraged collective resistance.

Furthermore, these narratives can be understood within the framework of symbolic politics, where political meaning is constructed and communicated through symbols that evoke emotional and cultural resonance (Edelman, 1985). The use of culturally embedded expressions such as humor, local idioms, and familiar cultural references transformed abstract democratic concerns into tangible and relatable experiences.

This symbolic dimension enabled the movement to transcend formal political discourse and reach broader segments of society, including those typically less engaged in institutional politics. As such, the slogans functioned not merely as communication tools but as symbolic resources that shaped collective identity, reinforced group solidarity, and legitimized resistance. These findings reinforce Eyerman and Jamison's (1991) argument on the centrality of culture in social movements, while also demonstrating how framing processes and symbolic politics interact to sustain civic mobilization in contexts of constrained electoral competition.

Social capital can be observed in everyday settings when groups of people interact across social classes within the community's stratification system (Hidayat et al., 2022). In the context of this pro-democracy mobilization, community social capital has proven to be the primary resource underpinning the movement's success, not only disseminating messages but also organizing social initiatives such as a low-cost cooking-oil bazaar that strengthened emotional closeness with residents. This trust- and solidarity-based model of mobilization contrasts with transactional political practices often associated with local elections (Putnam, 1993).

From a funding perspective, the movement reflected a democratization of political costs. Community self-reliance through donations, food, meeting spaces, and campaign attributes became the main resource base. This indicates that political participation does not have to be financed by elites; it can be built from below by communities with democratic commitments. This contrasts with evidence from other local electoral contexts where economic vulnerability and clientelistic exchange help normalize money politics (Fitriani et al., 2019).

Table 1. Characteristics of Empty-Box Movement Volunteers

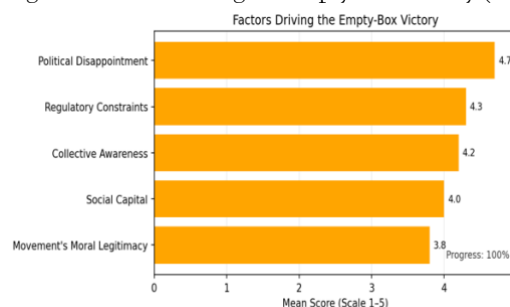
Background	Role in the Movement	Primary Motivation
Housewives	Field volunteers	Democratic awareness
Retirees	Organizers & supporters	Social solidarity
Activists	Coordinators & advocates	Resistance to elite domination
Academics	Facilitators of discussion & civic education	Collective awareness

A key factor driving the empty-box victory was deep public disappointment with political parties and the single candidate. Parties were perceived as failing in cadre development and prioritizing pragmatic interests over citizens' aspirations. This disappointment accumulated into political energy that was channeled through the symbolic choice of the empty box. Similar studies by Hadiz (2010) and Mietzner (2015) emphasize that

party dysfunction can be a major source of dissatisfaction and political resistance in Indonesia.

Negative sentiment toward the single candidate further strengthened resistance. Many residents viewed the single candidate as arrogant and unrepresentative, so spontaneous slogans such as "Asal Bukan Molen" became powerful expressions of rejection. Voting for the empty box was not merely passive; it served as an active democratic channel to refuse oligarchic domination.

Figure 1. Factors Driving the Empty-Box Victory (Scale 1–5).



The movement's moral legitimacy was reinforced by support from religious leaders, academics, cultural figures, and local media. Their presence in public discussions and media coverage positioned the empty box as a legitimate and dignified political agenda. This is consistent with Beetham's (1991) concept of political legitimacy, which underscores the importance of public endorsement and influential actors in establishing legitimacy for political movements. Moreover, the case of citizen mobilization in the empty-box movement confirms that local democratic processes are shaped by power relations, as evidenced by political interactions among actors seeking to accommodate their respective interests (Hidayat et al., 2023).

From the standpoint of power structures, broad party consolidation behind one candidate reflects nomination cartelization parties prefer to secure access to power through large coalitions rather than opening competition. Under such conditions, the empty box functions as a minimal channel of electoral accountability. However, the victory must also be read within local power relations: kinship politics and the influence of bureaucratic resources can close formal competitive space and push citizens to seek alternative channels of resistance (Putri et al., 2024).

A major issue identified in this study is the unclear legal status of the empty box. The absence of formal campaign rights, official polling-station witnesses, and facilitation by election administrators creates an asymmetrical contest and may trigger post-result conflict. This underscores the urgency of regulatory reform so that the empty box is treated as an institutional option with clear operational rules (Larasati & Samhudi, 2024).

Relatedly, regulatory inconsistency means that the empty box does not receive equivalent rights to other electoral contestants; it cannot campaign officially, lacks polling-station witnesses, and is not facilitated by election administrators. This condition has produced tensions and conflicts with election authorities and, in some instances, triggered protests. This indicates that Indonesia's electoral regulations are not yet fully prepared to effectively address the political realities of single-candidate contests and empty-box victories (Kurniawan & Wawanudin, 2019).

Ambiguous regulation also produces legal uncertainty after an empty-box victory. Crucial questions such as whether a

defeated single candidate may run again or whether the local election must be repeated still lack definitive answers. This uncertainty can generate legitimacy crises and democratic instability at the local level. Informants proposed revising local election regulations to grant the empty box equivalent legal standing, including campaign rights and legal protection. In addition, reforms to the nomination system are needed to minimize single-candidate contests by strengthening cadre development mechanisms and encouraging more than one candidate in each local election. If achieved, reliance on the empty box as a resistance mechanism could decline substantially.

Nevertheless, as long as single-candidate races remain possible, the empty box remains necessary as a democratic instrument to correct elite domination. The Pangkalpinang case demonstrates that citizens still have space to express political disappointment democratically through electoral mechanisms.

Overall, this study shows that citizen mobilization in the vote-empty-box movement constitutes resistance rooted in political disappointment, social solidarity, and local cultural creativity. The findings contribute to scholarship on social movements and electoral democracy in Indonesia and offer guidance for improving local election regulation so that local democracy can operate in a healthier and more competitive manner.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the empty-box movement in the 2024 Pangkalpinang local election represents an organic, cross-class form of political resistance to single-candidate dominance, emerging from citizen-driven networks rooted in community solidarity, local cultural expression, and social capital, and amplified through simple yet culturally resonant messaging. The findings advance the literature by showing that citizen mobilization under conditions of constrained electoral competition is best understood through an integrated framework of New Social Movement and connective action theories, wherein collective identity, decentralized organization, and digitally mediated networks jointly sustain political participation beyond formal institutional channels. From a governance perspective, the study highlights the urgent need for regulatory reform in single-candidate elections to restore meaningful competition and reinforce democratic accountability at the local level. Nevertheless, the analysis is bounded by its reliance on a single-case qualitative design, and its broader generalizability should therefore be interpreted with caution.

The case demonstrates civil society's capacity to mobilize organically to preserve the meaning of electoral competition when formal arenas are narrowed by elite consolidation. Mobilization was effective because it was supported by informal social networks, cultural framing, and solidarity practices that substituted for conventional political logistics. At the same time, the case confirms that political capital and kinship politics shape the opportunity structure of contestation; when formal channels of competition are locked, the empty box becomes an instrument of democratic correction. Recommended policy measures include: (1) clarifying the status and rights of the empty box in local election regulation, (2) strengthening internal party democracy and candidate recruitment to prevent repeated single-candidate contests, and (3) designing clear post empty-box-victory mechanisms to safeguard legitimacy and legal certainty.

The empty-box movement is not only a symbol of rejection; it also marks the emergence of alternative democratic space amid

disappointment with political parties. Social initiatives organized by volunteers strengthened emotional closeness with residents and reaffirmed that political participation does not always require elite support or extensive logistics.

However, regulatory limitations that do not explicitly accommodate the empty box as a political entity constitute a serious challenge. Unclear campaign rights, legal standing, and follow-up after an empty-box victory indicate gaps in the electoral system that should be addressed urgently. This creates legal ambiguity and opens space for tension during local political transitions.

This study is limited by its scope restricted to a single locality and by a qualitative approach that does not quantitatively measure broader public perceptions. Future research should examine similar movements in other regions to identify wider patterns, and explore the roles of non-political actors in filling local democratic voids. Further research should also deepen the legal and advocacy dimensions concerning recognition of the empty box's political rights as part of electoral reform in Indonesia.

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