

An Analysis of the Blank Ballot Phenomenon in the Maros Regency Local Elections

Marham Haris Saputra¹, Patta Hindi Asis^{*2}, Yunitawati Lampassa³

^{1,2,3} Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari

Jl. KH. Ahmad Dahlan No.10.Bonggoeya, Kec.Kadia, Kota Kendari Sulawesi Tenggara

Author's email : marhamhs543@gmail.com¹, patta.hindi@umkendari.ac.id^{*}, yunitawati@umkendari.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Since the 1998 Reformation, the development of democracy in Indonesia has made significant progress, despite facing challenges in implementing general elections, especially in the context of the empty box phenomenon. This research aims to analyze the factors that influence low voter participation in the 2024 Maros Regency Pilkada, as well as the implications for local democracy. The research method used was descriptive qualitative with data collection through purposive sampling, involving 10 informants from various backgrounds. The research results show that dissatisfaction with a single candidate, lack of political awareness, and lack of outreach from organizers are the main factors causing a decrease in voter participation. In addition, the empty box phenomenon reflects people's dissatisfaction with the available options, which has the potential to reduce democratic legitimacy. This research recommends the need for strategic steps to increase voter participation, including political education and support for diverse and competent candidates.

Keywords: Blank Box; Political Awareness; Political Participation; Local Democracy; Regional Head Election.

ABSTRAK

Sejak Reformasi 1998, perkembangan demokrasi di Indonesia mengalami kemajuan signifikan, meskipun menghadapi tantangan dalam pelaksanaan pemilihan umum, terutama dalam konteks fenomena kotak kosong. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi rendahnya partisipasi pemilih dalam Pilkada Kabupaten Maros tahun 2024, serta implikasinya terhadap demokrasi lokal. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan pengumpulan data melalui purposive sampling, melibatkan 10 informan dari berbagai latar belakang. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ketidakpuasan terhadap calon tunggal, minimnya kesadaran politik, dan kurangnya sosialisasi dari penyelenggara merupakan faktor utama yang menyebabkan penurunan partisipasi pemilih. Selain itu, fenomena kotak kosong mencerminkan ketidakpuasan masyarakat terhadap pilihan yang tersedia, yang berpotensi mengurangi legitimasi demokrasi. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan perlunya langkah strategis untuk meningkatkan partisipasi pemilih, termasuk edukasi politik dan dukungan terhadap calon yang beragam dan kompeten.

Kata kunci: Kotak Kosong, Kesadaran Politik, Partisipasi Politik, Demokrasi Lokal, Pilkada

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1998 Reformasi, democracy in Indonesia has developed significantly. Democracy is understood very broadly. Whatever its form, the phenomenon of democracy is very interesting to talk about. Especially if it is associated with the reality, that Indonesia is a country that still makes the democratization process a foundation (Mulyadi et al. 2024). As a democratic country, Indonesia is one of the countries that holds a democracy party every 5 years. Democracy party is a term used to describe the electoral process carried out by civil society in a democratic system.

Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections explains that the implementation of general elections by the people directly is an effort to realize the sovereignty of the people to create a democratic government based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution. As a pillar of democracy, the General Election (PILKADA) and the Regional Head Election (PILKADA) are inseparable from the phenomenon and controversy in each of their implementations, many factors affect one of which in recent years has been the Single Candidate or the public in general calling the empty box that occurred in several districts/cities in the Regional Elections in 2024. Data from the General Election Commission (KPU) shows that the number of regions with a single candidate increased from 3 regions in the 2015 Regional Elections to 25 regions in the 2020 Regional Elections and then 37 regions in the 2024 Regional Elections.

The phenomenon of empty boxes in the regional elections can be interpreted as a condition in which there is no choice of candidates who meet the expectations of the majority of the community or when the regional elections are held even though there is no significant competition. Although Indonesian law allows for candidacy with blank boxes as an alternative option, this phenomenon raises questions about the extent to which this is in line with democratic principles (Rahmanto 2018).

In a healthy democracy, principles such as freedom of choice, justice, equality, and active participation are essential to ensure quality elections. The phenomenon of empty boxes can raise concerns about how effective democratic mechanisms are in giving people decent choices. The lack of public involvement or lack of competition in the regional elections can reduce the legitimacy of the election results and disrupt public trust in the existing political system (Andrian et al. 2024).

In some cases, the phenomenon of empty boxes indicates a monopoly of power or a lack of active political participation from the community. This has resulted in questions about the transparency, accountability, and representation that should exist in a healthy

democracy. Voters may feel that there is no significant change they can expect, so they are less motivated to participate in the election process.

In an effort to address this phenomenon, it is necessary to take strategic steps to encourage wider political participation, support the emergence of diverse and competent candidates, and ensure a fair and transparent election process (Hidayat, 2023). Political education for the public is also very important so that they can understand their rights and responsibilities as voters, as well as the importance of participation in maintaining the health of democracy. From the phenomenon described earlier, studies related to empty boxes are still interesting to study. It can be explained that although there is a lot of similar research, this article examines other aspects such as what factors influence voters to channel their voting rights with the phenomenon of empty boxes, then why the participation of community voters in this district decreases, and then what strategies are carried out or steps taken by organizers in increasing voter participation and its influence on the local democratic context.

The election of regional heads (Pilkada) is a democratic process in determining regional leaders in Indonesia which includes the direct election of regional heads by the people using their voting rights. But in each process there is always something new and interesting in every Regional Head Election is held, for example the Empty Box Phenomenon. Based on this, Voter Participation is closely related to the sustainability and process of the Election as in Maros Regency In 2024, the researcher here tries to analyze using the theory or opinion of Verba and Nie (1972) which emphasizes the aspect of voter participation with 3 indicators which include 1. Use of Voting Rights, 2. Involvement in Campaigns, 3. Political Discussions. The final goal of this study is to determine voter participation with the phenomenon of empty boxes in the 2024 Maros Regency Regional Head Election.

RESEARCH METHODS

The method used in this study uses descriptive qualitative with a data collection technique by purposive sampling, namely the determination of informants as the source of data that is deliberately determined by the researcher. According to Sugiyono (2010), descriptive qualitative research is a type of research that seeks to provide a comprehensive and detailed description of a phenomenon observed or experienced by the research subject, and purposive sampling is used to allow researchers to select samples faster than random sampling.

The main objective of this descriptive qualitative research is to describe systematically, factually, and accurately the facts and characteristics of a particular population or area. The informants in the study amounted to 10 people, namely the General Election Commission (KPU) of Maros Regency, local Academics/Political Experts, Community Leaders and Youth/Students. In addition, the researcher has also made observations at several polling stations (Polling Stations) Then this research is also supported by secondary data in the form of related journals, books and laws and regulations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of empty boxes in the election of regional heads has become a concern for researchers and political practitioners (N.D.). Based on the results of research that has been carried out by researchers in the field, the researcher obtained several findings that have also been previously reduced, then the researcher tries to divide into several sub-discussions or indicators in this research that cause a decrease or low political/voter participation in the Regional Head Election (Pilkada) in Maros Regency in 2024 to the phenomenon of empty boxes and its influence on the context of local democracy. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap.

Maros Regency Voter Participation

According to (Miriam Budiardjo 2008) Political participation is the activity of a person or group of people to actively participate in political life, either directly or indirectly, such as by electing state leaders or influencing public policy. Political participation is one of the important aspects of democracy because it shows the active involvement of the community in the political process. A high level of participation indicates that people follow and understand political issues and want to participate in political activities.

Contextually in the Regional Elections, democracy is highly dependent on public participation in the election process. Society, as the mainstay and main pillar of democracy, often considers non-involvement in the electoral process as a natural thing. However, if we look closely at the current conditions, people should be more aware of the importance of channeling their voting rights. The following is a trend or percentage index of voters in the Maros Regency Regional Election in the last 15 years

Table 1. Percentage of Voters in Maros Regency

Year	Number of Voters	Voting Rights Users	Percentage
2015	258,953	159,280	61.51
2020	252,887	197,107	77.94
2024	278,930	194,185	69.62

Source: Maros Regency KPU Data 2024

Table 2. Percentage of Voters in Maros Regency

Year	Number of Voters (DPT)	Voting Rights Users	Empty Box Selector	Single Candidate Voters	Invalid Votes
2024	278,930	194,185	68,527	121,892	3,766

Source: Maros Regency KPU Decree Number 1014 of 2024 concerning the Determination of Regional Election Results

Table 1. and table 2. above shows that there have been fluctuations in the last 15 years related to the percentage of voters in the Maros Regency Regional Head Election, starting in 2015 with a fairly high number of voters compared to the 2020 Regional Elections where the number of DPT and DPTb was 252,887 voters. Voting rights users reached 197,104, bringing the total election participation rate to 77.94 percent. However, only 159,280 used their voting rights in the 2015 Regional Elections, while in the 2024 Regional Elections, the number of DPT was 278,930 voters. However, there are only 194,185 voting rights users, meaning that voter participation is only 69.62 percent Then we can see in table 2 in the 2024 Maros Regency Regional Elections of the total DPT and Voting Rights Users there are around 84,745 voters who did not distribute voting rights or there was a decrease in the Voter Participation rate by 8%.

Of course, if we only see an 8 percent decrease in the existing one, this is just ordinary, but if we look at the total DPT above there are around 84,745 voters who do not use or channel their voting rights in the regional elections, this is certainly not just a mere number. The public feels that indeed the moment in this regional head election does not make them move to express support or just vote for a candidate for the leader, from this number it also becomes a question of what and to what extent the role of the organizers in ensuring voters can use their voting rights. The interview that the Researcher then conducted with the Head of the Legal and Human Resources Sub-Division of the KPU of Maros Regency said;

"The low or declining level of community participation or voters is caused by a lack of awareness that the public should feel that this election is the right and obligation of every citizen to come and vote. We as organizers are just like a referee nothing more, the KPU has worked optimally with all the series that has been scheduled, both from the KPU RI,

Province to the district level, Voter Participation is always associated with the benchmark of poor performance by the KPU even though this is a joint task of both local governments, political parties, and communities to how to jointly educate the public to come to channel their voting rights" (Interview, MA/18/12/24).

Based on the results of the interview above, it can be concluded that there are indeed variables and factors that occur in the field that influence voters to distribute their voting rights, the organizers in this context the KPU has tried to boost community involvement as a whole, various efforts have been made such as socialization, political education has been carried out. Then, as also said by the Commissioner of the Maros Regency KPU Division of Socialization, Voter Education, and Parmas stated;

"Regarding the decline in voter participation, we understand that political dynamics, such as the presence of a single candidate, can affect public motivation to participate, indeed the KPU targets voter participation of 80 percent, but again the number of candidates has a great influence on the number of voter participation".

The role of the community in elections is not only to use the right to vote, but also to play an active role in ensuring that the democratic process runs well and transparently (Satria et al., 2023). Based on the data and statements above, this seems to show that voter participation is greatly influenced by several factors, such as available candidates, and political campaigns. Then the preferences of voters in the 2024 Maros Regency Regional Head Election (Pilkada) are quite diverse, based on the results of interviews that have been conducted with several communities, youth leaders and student researchers here draw two conclusions that determine voters to channel their voting rights, (1). External factors in the context of voter political behavior are considerations that come from outside a voter as an effect of socializing their values, norms, and social system. (2) internal factors, namely voters' considerations that originate from within them as a result of interpretation of knowledge and appreciation from the daily life of a voter.

Single Candidate and Empty Boxes and Their Influence

The existence of democracy in the implementation of the Regional Elections in Indonesia is expected to be able to represent the people's voice effectively and fairly, where every voter can choose a leader who is considered worthy to represent their aspirations. Democracy emphasizes free and honest choices as a form of people's sovereignty. However, the phenomenon of "empty boxes" in the Regional Elections also emerged as a form of expression of dissatisfaction from voters with the existing candidate, in this case a single candidate.

The presence of a single candidate in the regional elections is indeed not something that violates the law either in the form of regulations or legal legislation, so this phenomenon has appeared in several regions, especially in Maros Regency, South Sulawesi. Before 2015 we did not know the terms single candidate and empty box, but that changed after the regional elections that were held that year, there were several regions where there were only a few single candidates. Through the Constitutional Court Decision Number 100/PUU-XIII/2015 which was followed up with the provisions of Article 14 paragraph 1 of the General Election Commission Regulation Number 13 of 2018 concerning Amendments to the General Election Commission Regulation Number 14 of 2015 concerning the Election of Governor and Deputy Governor, Regent and Deputy Regent, And/or Mayor and Deputy Mayor with One Pair of Candidates, which states that regions that only have one pair of regional head candidates can participate in the Pemilukada simultaneously (Mahardika 2021).

Of course, the decision is one of the steps and solutions provided for the sustainability of the good Pemilukada process, this decision is considered fair, both by the voters and those who will be elected. Voters can choose a blank box as their disapproval of the Single Pair Candidate who registered in the Regional Elections. Meanwhile, the Single Pair Candidate who is the chosen party is allowed to advance in the Regional Election even without the opposing Pair, which in this case is against the Empty Box.

But various questions arise from the wider community what are the factors and causes underlying the birth of empty boxes. This then became a question related to the rules and regulations of the government and the role of political parties that became the bridge for the contestants. Law (UU) Number 10 of 2016 concerning the General Election of Regional Heads sets a relatively high threshold for candidacy. Political parties or coalitions of political parties must meet the requirement to obtain at least 20 percent of the number of DPRD seats or 25 percent of the accumulated valid votes in the general election of DPRD members in the region concerned. This makes it difficult for political parties, especially those that have few seats in the DPRD, to carry candidates. This then has an impact on the dominance and wholesale actions of the party by a single candidate and the absence of representative figures of the party as well as the lack of electoral and electability to existing figures make the phenomenon of empty boxes appear.

Based on the above, of course, they are interrelated, the lack of figures that appear has implications for the low interest in people's political involvement to channel their

voting rights, so that voters are mostly apathetic and pragmatic. An interview that the researcher has also conducted with Hassanudin University Academics said;

"There are many variables that result in provisions so that people do not come to the polling station, this can be categorized into 3, namely: (1) Ideological Golput is a form of political attitude that occurs among voters, especially novice voters. They did not channel their voting rights because they felt that their political aspirations were not represented by the existing candidate pairs. Not considering the existing figure can be one of the alternative candidates in the contestation process, even if no matter who is there is considered not to represent his political aspirations. (2) Economic Issues, the tendency of the public is none other than to use their choice for candidates who use money politics, then the last (3) Administration, this is actually very important because voters feel called when there is C6, and then it is not well documented" (Interview ALI/18/12/24).

The phenomenon of empty boxes in the Regional Elections shows that there is dissatisfaction from some voters with the existing single candidate. While the presence of a single candidate does not offend, it may reflect a lack of choice for voters and raise questions about the quality of the democracy being run. In this context, it is important to understand that democracy is not only about elections, but also about providing people with diverse choices.

(Dewi et al. 2022) in their research "Analysis of the Role of the General Election Commission (KPU) in Community Political Participation in Regional Elections and Minimizing Golput" also argued that although indeed community political participation can be carried out by all citizens who are mature enough or can channel their voting rights, the fact in the field is that there are several factors that affect political participation in each individual in society, including (1). Low awareness in each individual, (2) Lack of public knowledge of political awareness, (3) Lack of socialization carried out by the KPU, (4) Lack of credibility of prospective leaders, (5) Low trust in the government.

In addition to the above, what makes the people of Maros Regency in this year's Regional Elections quite a lot do not use their voting rights because they feel that this year's Regional Elections are set by a single candidate, the dominance of a single candidate in this election because the candidate pair who advances is the incumbent, issues about the non-neutrality of election organizers as well as media wars and opinion wars between single candidates and empty boxes make some people of Maros Regency not to make a choice (Golput).

One of the factors that can increase the legitimacy of democracy among individuals is the availability of a wide space for participation. Through participation in decision-making, the people can continuously maintain the government's responsiveness to the

people's preferences (Mariana 2009). This is certainly a vulnerability that erodes democracy at the local level, the hope of democracy that has been running so far is to provide a wider space for political participation to the community, but the dynamics that occur are the opposite. High power, regulations that are considered still chaotic make the public pessimistic and think that the election is just a waste of time, even though the existing results are expected to be able to make a change, however, some people of Maros Regency think that there are still no significant changes.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of empty boxes in the 2024 Maros Regency Regional Election is a reflection of low voter participation which is influenced by several factors such as lack of trust in candidates, lack of political awareness, and dissatisfaction with the existing election mechanism. Although a single candidate does not violate the law, his existence raises questions about the quality of democracy and representation of society. To increase voter participation, collaborative efforts from various parties, including election organizers, political parties, and the public, are needed in educating and encouraging broader political involvement. Only in this way can local democracy function effectively and accountably, making room for more diverse societal aspirations.

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