

# Adaptive Communication and Religious Inclusivity in the Electoral Defeat of a Long-Term Incumbent

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the unexpected electoral defeat of a three-term incumbent in the 2024 Provincial Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah (DPRD) race in Central Java's Electoral District 4, an area historically characterized by strong Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) socioreligious dominance and long-term Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB) electoral stability. While existing research on Indonesian local politics underscores incumbency advantage rooted in ritual embeddedness, symbolic authority, and organizational loyalty, such explanations are insufficient to capture the challenger's unprecedented rise. This article addresses that gap by examining the relational, communicative, and symbolic mechanisms that reshaped voter preferences. Using a qualitative case-study design, the research draws on eighteen semi-structured interviews, participant observation in religious and community events, digital-content analysis, and official data from the General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU). The findings reveal that the incumbent experienced a substantive decline in symbolic authority due to reduced ritual visibility and diminishing emotional proximity, corresponding with an 8–12% decrease in vote share across key polling-station clusters. Conversely, the challenger constructed legitimacy through embodied service practices, adaptive political communication tailored to diverse audiences, and hybrid digital–offline visibility that amplified everyday interactions into credible public narratives. The study concludes that voter behavior in NU-based rural constituencies is undergoing a cultural reorientation in which sincerity, accessibility, and continuous moral presence now outweigh structural party advantages. These insights expand theoretical discussions on personalization, symbolic legitimacy, and relational politics in Indonesia's decentralized electoral landscape, providing a more nuanced understanding of how challengers can penetrate entrenched socioreligious strongholds.

## Keywords

candidate-centered politics, adaptive communication, challenger strategy, religious inclusivity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Political competition in Indonesia's open-list proportional representation electoral system has increasingly shifted toward candidate-centered evaluation, where voters prioritize personal credibility, emotional proximity, and demonstrable service over party structures or ideological alignment (Carey



& Shugart, 1995; Norris, 2019; Rahmawati & Malani, 2022). This broader shift reflects a deeper transformation in Indonesian political behavior following decentralization, in which voters in rural and semi-urban areas assess leadership through everyday social interaction, cultural resonance, and relational humility (Aspinall, 2014; Fossati, 2019a). The personalization of politics in Indonesia, therefore, cannot be separated from the restructuring of political authority at the grassroots, where community expectations emphasize moral character, responsiveness, and visibility (McAllister, 2016; Mietzner, 2018).

Central Java Electoral District 4 covering Kabupaten Pati and Kabupaten Rembang—is widely recognized as a stronghold of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), making it a traditional electoral base for the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB). In such socio-religious ecosystems, incumbents typically enjoy strong advantages because they maintain ritual presence, receive symbolic endorsement from *kiai*, and possess long-standing familiarity within NU grassroots networks (Addiansyah et al., 2021; Fealy, 2019). Historically, these factors allow incumbents to retain their seats consistently, as authority in NU communities is embedded in ritual participation and daily proximity rather than formal political status (Bertrand, 2021; Ida, 2011). Within this context, electoral outcomes for the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah (DPRD) / Regional House of Representatives are usually predictable and heavily shaped by socio-religious patronage.

However, the 2024 DPRD Provincial election in this district revealed a significant anomaly. A relatively new candidate, Sugiarto, succeeded in defeating a three-term PKB incumbent who held deep relational and symbolic ties to NU structures. This unexpected outcome challenges the dominant assumptions that incumbency advantage in NU-based constituencies is structurally entrenched due to embedded ritual authority, superior network access, and established symbolic legitimacy (Erikson & Titunuk, 2015; Warburton, 2016b). The case suggests that authority in rural Java is undergoing transformation shifting from institutional embeddedness toward relational and communicative adaptability (Nurhasim, 2018; Pepinsky, 2017).

Previous studies on personalization in Indonesian politics have largely focused on elite branding, media visibility, or party-based mobilization (Branton et al., 2025; McAllister, 2016). However, much less attention has been given to understanding how challenger candidates construct legitimacy within deeply institutionalized religious environments where access to ritual networks is typically monopolized by incumbents (Lim, 2013; Nurmandi & Kim, 2020). Similarly, scholarship on PKB often highlights structural linkages with NU but rarely explains how non-elite or non-NU actors can penetrate the same relational and ritual spheres (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2019). These gaps leave unanswered questions about the underlying micro-processes through which adaptive communication, emotional closeness, hybrid offline–digital strategies, and embodied service enable challengers to gain community acceptance.

Against this background, this study examines how Sugiarto successfully built electoral legitimacy in a socioreligious environment that has historically favored incumbents. This article focuses on three key mechanisms: (1) the erosion of the incumbent's symbolic and relational presence at the community level, (2) the challenger's construction of adaptive, culturally embedded communication that resonates across diverse religious constituencies, and (3) the hybridization of offline service practices with digital storytelling that expanded his symbolic presence beyond physical interactions (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Naeem et al., 2025).

Drawing on a qualitative case-study approach, this article contributes empirically and theoretically to broader discussions on Indonesian political behavior. Empirically, it illustrates how a

challenger with limited structural resources can mobilize relational legitimacy to overcome entrenched incumbency. Theoretically, it extends debates on personalization by demonstrating that personalization in rural Muslim communities is moral and embodied, not merely media-driven (Goffman, 1974; Hjarvard, 2012). Conceptually, this research underscores that political trust in NU communities is crafted through service, humility, and continuous presence—values deeply rooted in Javanese-NU culture (Fealy, 2019; Ida, 2011). Ultimately, this introduction positions the 2024 Pati–Rembang election as an analytically significant case that challenges assumptions about incumbency resilience in faith-based constituencies and demonstrates the rising salience of relational-moral legitimacy in contemporary Indonesian politics.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case-study design to investigate the communicative, relational, and symbolic mechanisms underlying Sugiarto’s electoral victory in Central Java’s Electoral District 4. The district—covering Kabupaten Pati and Kabupaten Rembang—is a region historically dominated by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), making its political dynamics particularly relevant for exploring how challenger candidates can penetrate long-standing religious and political structures. A qualitative case-study approach was chosen because such designs are well suited to capturing contextual depth, complexity, and meaning in socially embedded political behavior (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2018). Qualitative case studies have been widely used in Indonesian political research to understand micro-level interactions that cannot be captured through aggregate quantitative indicators (Aspinall, 2014; Mietzner, 2018).

Data collection was conducted between October 2023 and May 2024 using three integrated techniques: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document and digital-content analysis. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to explore perceptions, emotions, and interpretations of community members regarding leadership, legitimacy, and electoral behavior—dimensions that scholars argue are central to personalization in Indonesian rural politics (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2019; McAllister, 2016). A total of eighteen interviews were conducted with NU youth members, local religious teachers (ustadz), community elders, volunteers from competing candidates, women’s groups, and village-level organizers from Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB / National Awakening Party). A purposive and snowball sampling strategy was applied to identify individuals with rich knowledge of electoral dynamics and social relations in the field, consistent with qualitative methodologies emphasizing depth over representativeness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participant observation was carried out at numerous community and religious events, including pengajian, tahlilan, kerja bakti, local meetings, volunteer coordination sessions, and house-to-house canvassing. This approach enabled the researcher to directly observe relational performances, symbolic gestures, emotional interactions, and community responses—elements that scholars of religious and cultural politics argue are essential to understanding leadership in NU-based environments (Fealy, 2019; Ida, 2011). Observing how candidates interacted in ritual settings provided valuable insights into how voters construct moral evaluations, as embodied gestures and cultural etiquette often carry more weight than formal political messaging (Goffman, 1974; Pepinsky, 2017).

Document analysis included reviewing the official results published by the Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU / General Elections Commission), internal campaign messaging, WhatsApp communication materials, volunteer documentation, and digital storytelling produced by local media teams such as S3tivi. Digital content was especially important because hybrid mediatization—where

offline actions are amplified through online narratives—has become an increasingly central component of political communication in Indonesia (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Lim, 2013; Nurmandi & Kim, 2020). The incorporation of digital artifacts allowed for analysis of how emotional proximity was constructed for audiences who did not directly interact with the candidate.

Data analysis followed an iterative process combining thematic coding and process tracing. All interview transcripts, field notes, and digital materials were coded manually to identify recurring patterns such as declining relational presence, adaptive communication, service-based authenticity, emotional proximity, and hybrid visibility. Coding was conducted in multiple cycles—open, axial, and selective—following standards outlined by Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014). Process tracing was used to reconstruct the sequence of events leading to changes in political perception and voter behavior, consistent with methodologies emphasizing causal-process identification in qualitative research (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). Triangulation across interviews, observations, documents, and digital content strengthened the internal validity of the analysis, a practice widely recommended in political ethnography (Bertrand, 2021; Warburton, 2016b).

Researcher positionality was critically considered because the study took place in a culturally dense environment dominated by NU norms and social expectations. As recommended by Moleong (2019) and Creswell (2018), the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document assumptions, minimize bias, and ensure interpretive transparency. Ethical standards were strictly upheld: all participants provided informed consent; identities were anonymized; and confidential information especially regarding intra-party conflict within PKB and local community sensitivities was protected. These ethical principles align with international best practices for qualitative political research, particularly when studying vulnerable or tightly knit communities (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2019).

Overall, the methodological design of this study reflects scholarly recommendations for analyzing political behavior in religiously embedded environments, where legitimacy is shaped through intimate social relations, ritual practices, moral evaluations, and mediated narratives rather than formal institutional factors alone (Fealy, 2019; Hjarvard, 2012; Norris, 2019). By combining direct interaction, digital evidence, and systematic qualitative analysis, this study generates an empirically rich and theoretically grounded account of how challenger candidates can successfully compete against entrenched incumbents in NU-dominated constituencies.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 Erosion of Symbolic Authority**

The findings reveal a consistent erosion of the incumbent's symbolic authority, particularly evident in the decline of his ritual presence and weakening emotional proximity across village communities. In NU-based rural settings, political legitimacy is inseparable from continuous participation in religious routines, everyday interactions, and gestures of humility that symbolize moral alignment with the community (Fealy, 2019; Ida, 2011). When these practices diminish, villagers interpret the absence not merely as reduced activity but as a relational and moral withdrawal.

Interview data strongly reflect this sentiment. A youth NU member noted, "We hardly see him anymore; he only comes for big events, not the small gatherings that matter to us." (Interview, 12 Feb 2024). Another villager emphasized, "He used to sit on the floor with us. Now he sends his people instead." (Interview, 7 Jan 2024). These testimonies illustrate how relational distance directly translates into declining symbolic authority, aligning with broader scholarly findings that political

legitimacy in religious communities is deeply tied to everyday presence (Bertrand, 2021; Norris, 2019).

Importantly, KPU vote recapitulation data confirm a significant decline of approximately 8–12% for the incumbent across multiple TPS clusters, particularly in areas where his presence had weakened most visibly. This numerical drop provides empirical reinforcement for the qualitative accounts gathered during fieldwork. The convergence of interview narratives and electoral data strengthens the conclusion that the incumbent’s legitimacy eroded not only symbolically but materially in voting outcomes.

Figure 1. Model of Incumbent Authority Disembedding

Reduced Presence → Symbolic Vacuum → Erosion of Charisma → Loss of Ritual  
Embeddedness → Decreased Moral Credibility → Declining Vote Share

This figure illustrates the chain reaction described by scholars of relational legitimacy and political embeddedness (Giddens, 1991; Weber et al., 1978), demonstrating how a decrease in presence destabilizes authority in culturally dense communities, such as NU villages. This presents a comparative overview of the relational legitimacy dimensions that distinguish the incumbent from Sugiarto across key aspects of community engagement.

Table 1. Comparative Relational Legitimacy: Incumbent vs. Sugiarto

Dimension	Incumbent	Sugiarto
Social Presence	Rare, ceremonial only	Frequent, everyday presence
Ritual Engagement	Occasional, symbolic	Consistent, meaningful
Communication Style	Top-down, monologic	Dialogical, adaptive
Service Orientation	Sporadic	Continuous embodied service
Digital Representation	Minimal	Rich narrative videos
Community Perception	Distant	Humble, sincere

These contrasts clearly demonstrate why voters gradually shifted their trust toward Sugiarto, whose consistent presence and embodied sincerity aligned more closely with the community’s cultural expectations of leadership. As the incumbent’s presence faded, the community began reassessing their expectations of leadership, creating an opening for the challenger. This shift is consistent with scholarly observations that incumbency advantage collapses rapidly when relational duties are neglected (Aspinall, 2014; Warburton, 2016). Therefore, the erosion of symbolic authority served as the foundational mechanism shaping the broader electoral transformation in Pati–Rembang.

### 3.2 Adaptive Political Communication

The second key finding highlights the challenger’s strategic use of adaptive political communication, which allowed him to establish resonance across diverse sociocultural groups within Pati and Rembang. Unlike the incumbent—whose communication style had become increasingly formal, ceremonial, and predictable—the challenger consistently adjusted his rhetorical register, symbolic cues, and interactional tone based on the audience he encountered. This ability to shift communicative style across contexts reflects what scholars describe as audience-centered political communication, where effectiveness depends on cultural sensitivity and situational awareness rather than message uniformity (Karlsen & Skogerbo, 2015; Street, 2019).

During recitation gatherings or meetings with religious elders, the challenger employed NU devotional vocabulary such as *ikhlas*, *barokah*, and *silaturahmi*, delivered with soft Javanese intonation that conveyed humility and respect. Such discursive alignment signals relational deference, which is deeply valued within NU communities. As one ustadz articulated, “He speaks according to our rhythm; he uses our language, and that makes him feel close.” (Interview, 4 Jan 2024). This alignment demonstrates a culturally encoded form of political fluency that strengthens affective bonds with religious constituents. It also reinforces earlier observations that effective communication in Javanese-Muslim settings requires not only linguistic familiarity but also mastery of subtle emotional expressions, gestures, and demeanor that signify cultural attunement (Fealy, 2019; Ida, 2011).

In contrast, when interacting with youth groups, student communities, or village-based creative networks, the challenger shifted to a different communicative mode. He discussed digital opportunities, vocational pathways, and contemporary economic concerns in a conversational and informal manner. A young respondent emphasized this clarity: “He talks about things young people care about, and he simply explains them. He feels like someone who understands our reality.” (Interview, 28 Dec 2023). This style resonated strongly with younger voters, who tend to prioritize clarity, accessibility, and practical relevance over ritual authority or traditional symbolic capital (Naeem et al., 2025; Norris, 2019).

This shift also reflects a deeper generational divide in political expectations. While older NU-based communities evaluate leaders through cultural humility and religious etiquette, younger voters focus more on future-oriented narratives. The challenger’s ability to bridge these divergent expectations gave him a dual legitimacy that the incumbent failed to sustain. The incumbent’s messaging remained largely ceremonial, repetitive, and disengaged from contemporary youth concerns, creating an impression of stagnation.

Moreover, adaptive communication also took place at the micro-interactional level. Field observations revealed that the challenger frequently adjusted body posture, seating position, physical distance, and speech rhythm depending on the social hierarchy of the group he met. With religious leaders, he maintained respectful physical distance and low posture; with farmers, he often sat cross-legged on mats; with youth, he adopted a relaxed posture that encouraged conversation. These embodied aspects of communication reinforced perceptions of sincerity and approachability, consistent with findings that relational authenticity is conveyed not only verbally but also through embodied comportment (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2019; Goffman, 1974).

Another emerging theme concerns the challenger’s capacity to listen actively. Multiple respondents highlighted that he allowed villagers to speak at length, asked follow-up questions, and reframed their concerns into actionable commitments. One informant noted, “He listens first, then speaks. That makes us feel respected.” (Interview, 5 Jan 2024). This contrasts with the incumbent’s style, which respondents described as more “directive” and “formulaic.” Such differences illustrate that adaptive communication is as much about listening and relational humility as it is about verbal persuasion.

Overall, this sub-section reveals that adaptive communication became a decisive mechanism through which the challenger built trust, emotional proximity, and symbolic alignment with constituents. Far from being a simple campaign tactic, his communication style functioned as a continuous relational performance that bridged generational divides, respected cultural norms, and compensated for structural disadvantages. In NU-dominated rural contexts, this type of adaptive, dialogic, and relational communication can become a powerful equalizer allowing newer candidates

to surpass incumbents who rely too heavily on historical authority rather than responsive engagement.

### 3.3 Embodied Service Politics

The third key finding highlights the central role of embodied service politics in shaping the challenger's legitimacy. In NU-based rural communities, political credibility is deeply rooted in daily gestures, moral comportment, and relational attentiveness rather than institutional status or ideological positioning. Throughout the fieldwork, residents consistently described the challenger not in terms of programmatic promises, but through tangible acts of service that were performed repeatedly and without theatrical display. These practices—visiting sick residents, assisting farmers with irrigation problems, joining *kerja bakti*, attending condolence gatherings, and participating in small religious circles—constituted what scholars identify as embodied political performance, where sincerity is communicated through action rather than rhetoric (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2019; Fossati, 2019b).

Interviews reflect a consistent narrative that these everyday acts signaled moral authenticity. A farmer noted, “He came to our fields, helped clean the canal, and listened to us without rushing.” (Interview, 21 Dec 2023). A women's group leader similarly emphasized, “He came when my neighbor was sick, and he came without any camera. That's why we trust him.” (Interview, 5 Jan 2024). Such testimonies illustrate how the challenger's approach embodied NU values of *tawadhu'* (humility), *andhap-asor* (lowering oneself), and *nguwongke* (recognizing the dignity of others). These are not merely cultural expectations—they constitute the ethical framework through which leadership is judged in rural Java.

Unlike the incumbent, whose appearances became limited to formal or ceremonial settings, the challenger cultivated a relational style that favored intimacy, informality, and continuity. His presence in small gatherings—where social bonds are formed and reaffirmed—created a sense of familiarity and everyday visibility. Several respondents contrasted this with the incumbent's behavior, stating that community engagements felt increasingly “delegated” and “brief.” This difference is consistent with research demonstrating that embodied interactions are central to maintaining symbolic authority in local politics, especially where religious-cultural norms shape moral expectations (Fealy, 2019; Ida, 2011).

An important pattern emerging from observations is the challenger's consistent use of non-verbal cues that signaled humility: arriving early and greeting elders, sitting at the same physical level as villagers, avoiding formal seating arrangements, and adopting a relaxed bodily posture when conversing. These gestures reinforced perceptions that he was not merely “present,” but present in the correct moral mode. Scholars argue that such embodied behaviors create emotional resonance, allowing political actors to be perceived as approachable and morally aligned with the community (Dale & Fuchs, 2018; Goffman, 1974).

Multiple respondents also highlighted the challenger's habit of staying longer in community events than typically expected. One villager explained, “He does not rush. He stays until the prayer finishes, then talks to us one by one.” (Interview, 10 Jan 2024). This extended time investment contrasts sharply with the prevailing expectation of brief political visits, and it served to further strengthen his perceived sincerity. Time, in this cultural context, becomes a moral resource—demonstrating respect, attentiveness, and genuine relational commitment.

Another dimension of embodied service politics was the challenger's readiness to engage in labor-intensive activities. Several informants cited instances where he participated in repairing drains, helping elderly residents move equipment, or cleaning communal spaces. These acts blur the boundary between political activity and communal labor, illustrating what anthropologists describe as participatory moral labor—where leaders demonstrate virtue through shared physical effort (Bertrand, 2021; Warburton, 2016). In villages where manual work reflects solidarity and togetherness, such actions carry significant symbolic weight.

Table 2. Thematic Breakdown of Informant Testimonies

These Category	Representative Quote	Interpretation
Declining Incumbent Bond	"He rarely visits us now."	Symbolic erosion
Ritual Absence	"He comes only for big events."	Loss of embeddedness
Challenger Sincerity	"He visits without cameras."	Embodied moral performativity
Youth Engagement	"He talks about jobs."	Adaptive relevance
Digital Resonance	"I see him in videos helping people."	Hybrid mediatization

Overall, the challenger's embodied service politics functioned as a powerful counterweight to the incumbent's fading presence. While the incumbent relied increasingly on his historical ties to NU networks, the challenger embedded himself in the community's everyday life through visible, emotionally resonant actions. These embodied practices not only compensated for his structural disadvantages but also produced a moral and relational legitimacy that became the foundation of his electoral success. In culturally embedded political environments, such forms of service-based authenticity can be more influential than formal political credentials, demonstrating why embodied politics remains a decisive factor in local Indonesian elections.

### 3.4 Hybrid Digital–Offline Mediatization

The fourth key finding concerns the pivotal role of hybrid digital–offline mediatization in amplifying the challenger's presence across Pati and Rembang. While his legitimacy was first constructed through direct, embodied interactions, these offline engagements gained broader political resonance through naturalistic digital documentation circulated across WhatsApp groups, Facebook communities, and local platforms such as S3tivi. This process reinforced the emotional and moral messages conveyed during face-to-face interactions, transforming local acts of service into widely shared narratives of sincerity and responsiveness.

Field interviews demonstrate that villagers perceived these digital materials not as staged campaign content but as authentic representations of the challenger's everyday conduct. A young voter explained, "Even when I haven't met him, I feel I know him because I see his videos helping people." (Interview, 9 Jan 2024). Another respondent emphasized, "The videos feel natural, not staged. They show real moments." (Interview, 13 Jan 2024). These impressions align with emerging scholarship showing that authenticity-oriented digital storytelling plays a crucial role in constructing political credibility, particularly among younger, digitally active voters (Naeem et al., 2025; Lim, 2013).



The effectiveness of this hybrid mediatization stems from its ability to merge two distinct layers of political communication. First, offline actions—helping farmers, visiting the sick, participating in *kerja bakti*—provided the raw material of authenticity. Second, when these actions were captured and circulated organically, they extended the challenger’s symbolic presence beyond physical limits. This created what (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) describe as “mediated presence,” where political actors appear available, approachable, and morally consistent even in their absence.

The contrast with the incumbent was striking. While the incumbent occasionally appeared in digital content, his presence was usually formal, ceremonial, and delivered through stiff documentation of institutional events. Voters perceived this content as distant and obligatory rather than relationally meaningful. As one respondent stated, “We see him only in big events online. It doesn’t feel like he’s with us.” (Interview, 11 Jan 2024). This stark contrast amplified the relational gap already formed through the incumbent’s declining everyday presence.

Another dynamic observed in the field is how villagers circulated the challenger’s content voluntarily. Several respondents reported forwarding videos to family members, neighbors, or community groups not because they were instructed to do so, but because the content felt emotionally resonant. This type of horizontal, peer-to-peer circulation reflects what scholars refer to as “vernacular mediation,” where political narratives spread through community interpretation rather than campaign direction (Lim, 2013). In NU-based rural contexts—where trust is often built within tight relational networks—such horizontal sharing carries significant persuasive weight.

The hybrid nature of the challenger’s visibility also influenced how different generations perceived him. Younger voters, who rely heavily on mediated impressions, used online content to form emotional familiarity. Older voters, meanwhile, used digital materials as extensions of what they had already seen offline. For them, the videos validated his sincerity rather than introducing him anew. This dual reception demonstrates that hybrid mediatization is not merely a youth-oriented strategy but a multi-generational bridge that reinforces consistency across communication channels.

Importantly, the digital component did not replace offline engagement—it intensified it. Voters repeatedly noted that the value of the videos lay in their reflection of real activities. As one elder commented, “The videos show what he actually does. We see it offline, then we see it again online.” (Interview, 18 Jan 2024). This looping dynamic between physical presence and mediated presence created a self-reinforcing cycle: the more he acted, the more those actions became visible; the more visible they became, the more voters interpreted them as genuine.

Table 3. Hybrid Mediatization Indicators

Indicator Type	Offline Expression	Online Expression	Analytical Meaning
Service Engagement	Helping farmers	Videos showing empathy	Embodied legitimacy → mediated charisma
Ritual Proximity	Attending tahlilan	Storytelling humility	Cultural embeddedness
Youth Interaction	Workshops	Skills-focused clips	Audience tailoring
Emotional Tone	Softspoken	Warm visuals	Affective resonance
Relational Continuity	Frequent visits	Persistent online presence	Relational omnipresence

Overall, this hybrid mediatization strengthened the challenger’s legitimacy by constructing a coherent narrative of sincerity across both offline and digital spheres. His presence became

continuous—physically in village routines and symbolically through digital circulation. In contrast, the incumbent's limited and formalistic digital expressions further highlighted his declining everyday proximity. These findings confirm that, in contemporary rural Indonesian politics, the interplay between embodied action and mediated storytelling is a decisive mechanism that reshapes voter perception and supports the rise of challenger candidates.

### 3.5 Reconstruction of Political Identity

The fifth key finding highlights a gradual but profound reconstruction of the challenger's political identity in the eyes of voters across Pati and Rembang. Initially perceived as a peripheral or secondary actor compared to a well-established incumbent, the challenger progressively redefined his political persona through accumulated relational practices, moral gestures, and adaptive communication patterns. His identity was not asserted through formal declarations but emerged organically through repeated, socially meaningful interactions that aligned with community expectations of leadership.

Interviews reveal that villagers began to reinterpret who the challenger was—not merely as a candidate, but as someone who embodied local moral values and relational norms. A resident explained, "He sits with us, listens, and does not act like a politician. He blends into our gatherings." (Interview, 14 Jan 2024). Another informant noted, "We started to feel he understands our daily problems because he always comes and asks what we need." (Interview, 8 Jan 2024). These comments indicate that identity reconstruction occurred through cumulative experience rather than campaign rhetoric. This aligns with (Goffman, 1974) concept of identity as a performative achievement, shaped through consistent enactments of role-appropriate behavior.

The challenger's political identity became further defined by his moral positioning. His repeated participation in small religious circles, frequent visits to sick community members, and willingness to engage directly in communal labor positioned him as a socially embedded figure. These actions communicated virtues such as humility, sincerity, and attentiveness—virtues highly valued within NU cultural frameworks. Over time, these performances contributed to the perception that he was ethically compatible with the community, even if he lacked the incumbent's long-standing institutional advantages.

Another crucial dimension of identity reconstruction involved the challenger's ability to unify multiple social groups under a single moral narrative. Interviews from youth communities emphasized his modern, forward-looking attitude, while older religious communities highlighted his politeness, respectfulness, and ritual sensitivity. Instead of crafting separate identities for different audiences, the challenger maintained a coherent relational persona—someone approachable, respectful, and responsive. This balance between cultural traditionalism and contemporary engagement allowed diverse voter segments to project their expectations onto him, making his emerging political identity both flexible and inclusive.

Identity reconstruction was also reinforced through contrast. As the incumbent's presence diminished and his relational attentiveness weakened, villagers began to reinterpret his identity with a more critical lens. Several informants expressed that the incumbent had become "distant," "hard to reach," or "less attentive than before." A local religious figure observed, "He used to be close to us, but now it feels formal. We miss the old version of him." (Interview, 5 Jan 2024). These reflections suggest that identity deconstruction happened simultaneously with the challenger's identity

construction. As the incumbent's symbolic position eroded, the community increasingly associated moral alignment and closeness with the challenger.

This identity shift was not merely emotional—it had structural implications. Once voters believed the challenger embodied the values of their community, they began to recalibrate their political expectations accordingly. Voters no longer viewed party affiliation or incumbency as sufficient indicators of credibility. Instead, they evaluated leadership through lived experience, relational accessibility, and moral resonance. The challenger's identity became anchored in a new form of legitimacy that transcended formal political indicators and rooted itself in everyday social evidence.

Furthermore, field observations reveal that identity reconstruction crystallized through narrative repetition within community networks. Villagers frequently shared similar stories about the challenger's visits, his respectful attitude, and his willingness to participate in mundane communal tasks. These stories circulated organically, reinforcing a shared perception of who he was. This social reproduction of narrative aligns with theories of symbolic interactionism, which emphasize that identities are collectively constructed through repeated social affirmation (Dale & Fuchs, 2018).

Even digital content contributed to this identity-making process. Videos and photos circulating in local WhatsApp groups showed him interacting naturally with residents—kneeling beside elderly villagers, helping farmers lift equipment, or sitting cross-legged in informal gatherings. These images acted as visual confirmations of his offline persona, strengthening the coherence of his emerging political identity. In this sense, the identity being constructed was not merely political but profoundly moral, grounded in observable behavior rather than abstract claims.

Overall, the reconstruction of the challenger's political identity reflects a deeper transformation in how rural NU communities define leadership. Through relational attentiveness, embodied service, cultural sensitivity, and mediated visibility, he repositioned himself from an outsider into a morally aligned community figure. This reconstructed identity provided the social and emotional foundation that ultimately enabled voters to shift their loyalty away from an incumbent who had long been entrenched within local religious–political networks.

### **3.6 Cultural Reorientation of Voter Behavior**

The sixth key finding demonstrates a broader cultural reorientation in voter behavior within the NU-based rural communities of Pati and Rembang. This shift reflects deeper changes in how residents interpret political credibility, leadership legitimacy, and the moral obligations of elected representatives. While party identity, religious affiliation, and long-standing organizational loyalty have historically shaped electoral choices, the 2024 election results indicate that these structural anchors are no longer sufficient to secure voter support. Instead, voters increasingly prioritize sincerity, emotional accessibility, moral presence, and everyday social engagement as core indicators of trustworthy leadership.

Interviews consistently reveal that voters considered relational attentiveness and everyday presence as more meaningful than ideological alignment. A middle-aged respondent explained, “Party is important, religion is important, but presence and sincerity are more important now.” (Interview, 6 Jan 2024). Similarly, an NU youth member stated, “We choose the person who understands our daily problems. Not the one who only appears during big events.” (Interview, 12 Jan 2024). These statements indicate a shift in political evaluation away from institutional loyalty

toward relational performance—echoing broader trends documented in Indonesian local politics where moral legitimacy increasingly outweighs party structures (Fossati, 2019a; Pepinsky, 2017; Warburton, 2016).

This cultural reorientation is also shaped by generational change. Younger voters, especially those active on digital platforms, tend to prioritize clarity, authenticity, and future-oriented narratives. At the same time, older NU-based constituents maintain expectations rooted in ritual participation, humility, and cultural etiquette. The challenger successfully bridged these two orientations through a hybrid approach that blended cultural familiarity with modern communicative styles, enabling him to resonate across generational lines. This dual appeal explains why the decrease in the incumbent's vote share—confirmed by KPU data showing an 8–12% decline across TPS clusters—occurred not only in youth-dominated neighborhoods but also in traditional NU villages historically loyal to PKB.

Another important factor in this behavioral shift is the erosion of “automatic loyalty” to religiously affiliated political actors. While NU communities have long been associated with PKB due to shared historical and ideological ties, interviews show that villagers are now more willing to separate religious identity from political choice. Several respondents expressed discontent with relying solely on organizational lineage. One elder stated, “Being from NU is good, but that is not enough anymore. We need someone who actually comes to us.” (Interview, 8 Jan 2024). This indicates that religio-political affiliation is becoming less deterministic, replaced by what scholars term a “moral-evaluative logic,” where leaders are judged according to observable behavior rather than institutional background (Bertrand, 2021; Fealy, 2019).

The shift is further reinforced by higher expectations of political accountability at the village level. As decentralization expands local government responsibilities, villagers increasingly expect candidates to demonstrate responsiveness to their everyday needs—irrigation problems, health access, youth employment, and community welfare. The challenger's repeated presence in these everyday matters created a sense of grounded accountability, whereas the incumbent's decreasing accessibility generated perceptions of detachment. This mirrors broader findings that localized expectations of service provision profoundly shape electoral preferences in decentralized democracies (Aspinall, 2014; Mietzner, 2018).

Hybrid digital–offline dynamics also play a crucial role in shaping this cultural reorientation. Digital narratives circulating through WhatsApp groups and local media amplified perceptions of sincerity and responsiveness, making it easier for voters to reassess their political preferences. Younger voters used digital content as their primary source of political evaluation, while older voters used such content as reinforcement of what they observed offline. This “dual-channel confirmation” helped solidify the challenger's credibility and contributed to the community-wide shift in voter orientation.

Moreover, the decline of the incumbent's symbolic authority created an interpretive vacuum, prompting voters to reevaluate the meaning of leadership in their community. In the absence of consistent relational cues, villagers recalibrated their expectations and began to redefine leadership around relational proximity, moral integrity, and embodied attentiveness. This process illustrates how cultural norms governing political legitimacy are dynamic rather than static, evolving in response to changing social interactions and community expectations.

Overall, the findings strongly indicate that voter behavior in Pati and Rembang is transitioning from structurally anchored loyalty to relational–moral evaluation. Leadership is no

longer assessed solely through religious affiliation, party identity, or historical ties, but through ongoing relational performances and moral commitments demonstrated in everyday life. This cultural reorientation not only explains the challenger's electoral victory but also contributes to broader theoretical debates on personalization, symbolic legitimacy, and the transformation of political authority in Indonesia's rural socioreligious contexts.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that electoral outcomes in rural communities with strong socioreligious traditions are increasingly shaped by relational, symbolic, and moral performances rather than by institutional or party-based advantages. The incumbent's defeat reflects a gradual erosion of symbolic authority, visible in declining ritual participation, reduced emotional proximity, and weakened presence in everyday communal life. This decline was mirrored by measurable losses in vote share, indicating that legitimacy in such cultural settings diminishes rapidly when leaders fail to maintain continuous social engagement. In contrast, the challenger succeeded by cultivating relational legitimacy through consistent involvement in community practices, adaptive communication tailored to diverse audiences, and hybrid digital–offline visibility that amplified his everyday interactions. These combined mechanisms enabled him to be perceived as accessible, sincere, and morally aligned with local expectations, allowing him to overcome the incumbent's long-standing structural advantages.

Overall, the study highlights a broader cultural shift in voter behavior, where sincerity, accessibility, and sustained moral presence increasingly define political credibility and shape electoral preferences in rural Indonesia. This study contributes to the literature by revealing how relational legitimacy can decisively shape electoral outcomes in culturally embedded environments. It underscores the importance of examining micro-level moral performances, adaptive communication practices, and hybrid mediatization in understanding contemporary electoral behavior in Indonesia. Future research may extend these findings by comparing similar cases in other NU-based districts or exploring variations across different religious and cultural landscapes to deepen scholarly understanding of personalization and symbolic authority in Indonesia's decentralized political context.

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